Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie

PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY

PSYCOME

5

MURDER MACHINE AND THE CATASTROPHIC ATHLETIC FESTIVAL

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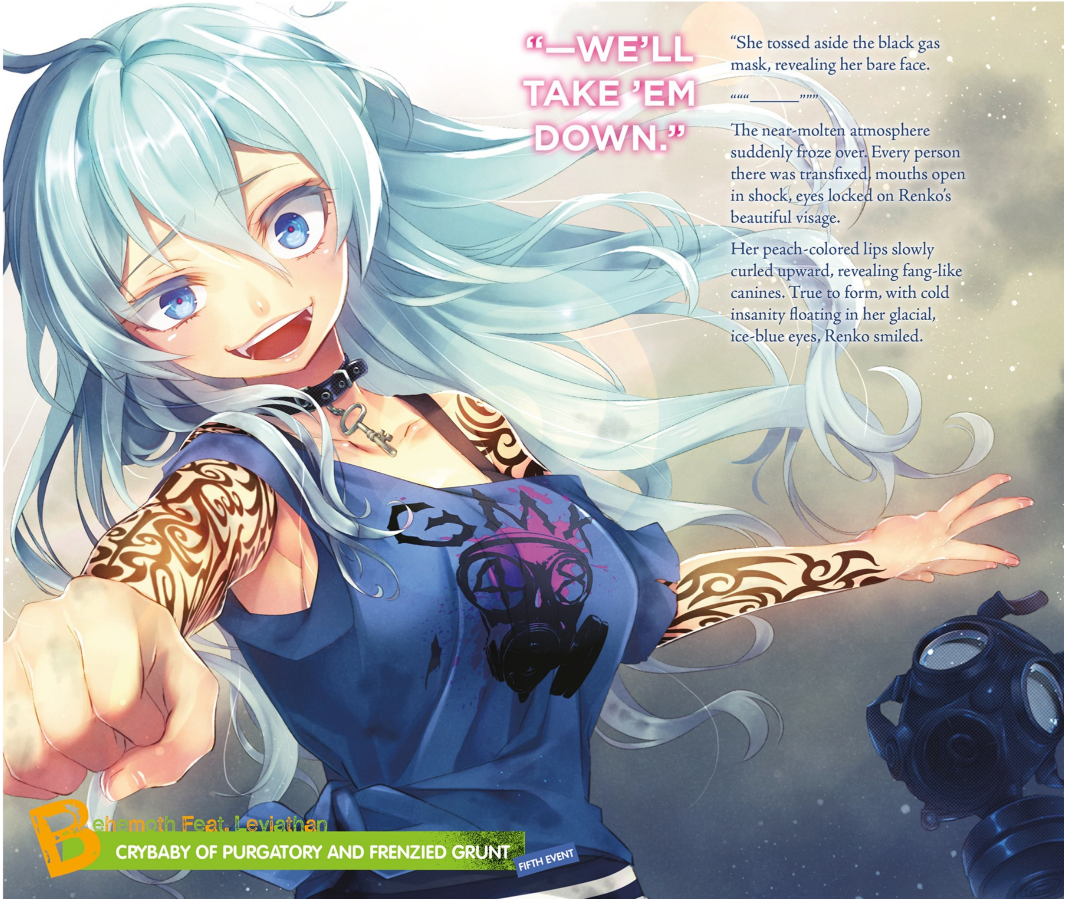
MURDER MACHINE AND THE CATASTROPHIC ATHLETIC FESTIVAL

Takamoto Yatsuzaki
Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka
Kurisu Arisugawa
Renji
The Murderers of Purgatorium Remedial Academy 4
THE MURDERERS OF PURGATORIUM REMEDIAL ACADEMY 4

“EEEEEE! GIVE IT UP, YOU PERVERT! JUST DIE ALREADY!”
Saki Shamaya
Eiri Akabane
“MISS AKABANEEEEEE! HA-HA!”
Scary Killers Scaring Killers
SCREAM OUT FESTIVAL
THIRD EVENT

“WHAT ARE YOU SCHEMING? I-IT’S SCARY… BRRR.”
Hijiri Kurumiya
“I MADE YOU A LUNCH BOX WITH TOP-GRADE INGREDIENTS. BE GRATEFUL AND EAT UP, PIGLETS!”
Ayaka Kamiya
Reiko Hikawa
“HEH-HEH. OKAY, OKAY, MY TURN, RIGHT?”


Behemoth Feat. Leviathan
CRYBABY OF PURGATORY AND FRENZIED GRUNT
FIFTH EVENT

"—WE'LL TAKE 'EM DOWN."

"She tossed aside the black gas mask, revealing her bare face.

"""—————"""

The near-molten atmosphere suddenly froze over. Every person there was transfixed, mouths open in shock, eyes locked on Renko's beautiful visage.

Her peach-colored lips slowly curled upward, revealing fang-like canines. True to form, with cold insanity floating in her glacial, ice-blue eyes, Renko smiled.

PSYCOME

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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MIZUKI MIZUSHIRO

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YCHO
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COMEDY

““““FUCK! YOU! FUCK! YOU!””””

A disturbing chorus echoed down the road leading from the old school building to the student dormitories.

Moving forward in two lines, boys and girls advanced in perfect order, their backs straight and bodies rigid all the way down to their fingertips. They lifted their right legs on *FUCK* and their left legs on *YOU*. Their impressive organization was reminiscent of a highly disciplined military unit.

However, they were not clad in military uniforms; instead, they wore white jerseys with black horizontal stripes. These tracksuits, designed with a prison motif, were the exercise uniforms provided by Purgatorium Remedial Academy, a school exclusively for underage murderers.

The spectacle of these murderers chanting “FUCK! YOU!” was absolutely unsettling. The menacing brutality seemed out of place in the early morning atmosphere.

Then—

“Maina Igarashiiiiiiiiiiii!”

A lisping Lolita voice resounded over the shouting of the boys and girls. One of the female students walking in the front row screamed, “Eeeeee?!” and cowered.

Watching their march from the sidelines, clad in a red jersey, was their homeroom teacher—Hijiri Kurumiya. She swung her trademark iron pipe and showered abuse on the panicking girl known as Maina.

“Again! Your movements are slipping again, you idiot!! The angles of your arms and legs are dropping. Pay attention! How much practice do you need to get it right?!”

“Eeek?! S-sorry—”

“I can’t hear you! How many times are you gonna make me tell you the same thing?! Don’t you have any motivation?!”

“Eeek! I-I-I do!”

“You answer ‘Yes, ma’am.’”

“Eeek!”

“I’m telling you to say ‘Yes, ma’am!’”

“Eee-y-yes!”

“…Are you joking around?”

“Yes!”

“

Kurumiya's forehead twitched. The next second—"Are you joking around, you asshoooooole!"—she let out an angry roar and swung the iron pipe, striking the asphalt in a cascade of fury.

"Eeek?!" Maina jumped. "So-so-so-so-so-sooo—Whoooooaaa?!" She tripped over her own feet.

Immediately, Oonogi, who had been walking behind her, tumbled forward over Maina's suddenly prone body. "Waah?!"

Kyousuke, who had been following Oonogi, collided with him, then Kousaka collided with Kyousuke, and Shinji with Kousaka…

"Fuck youuu—?!"

The entire left column collapsed like falling dominoes. Forward movement was out of the question. Maina, who had caused the disastrous scene, was pinned beneath Oonogi and starting to lose consciousness.

"I-Igarashi…y-you moron—" Kurumiya's shoulders were shaking, and it looked as if she was once again about to explode with rage.

Biiiiiiiiiiing, boooooooooong,
  Baaaaaaaaang, boooooooooong…

A distorted chime rang out, signaling the end of correctional duty. Perhaps deflated by the interruption, Kurumiya simply clicked her tongue. "…Tch."

Raising her iron pipe overhead, she struck out with sharp words rather than with that vicious weapon.

"Hmm…looks like you're saved by the bell. However, this won't do when it's time for the 'real deal.' Your blundering will lead to failure for your whole class, and it's going to be a matter of *life or death*—got it, Igarashi? You are the good-for-nothing blockhead handicapping the rest of us in first-year Class A. Be aware of that, and give a hundred times the effort of everyone else! If you don't, the result will be death. The death of your classmates—and your own."

"……Eeek…" Still prostrate on the ground, Maina replied with a sad whimper.

Oonogi sat up with a frown, then replaced his sunglasses.

After adjusting his rumpled hairstyle, Shinji sighed. "Good grief."

A garish female student cursed at Maina: "Like, what is the deal with that shrimp? You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Huuh?! Who's a 'shrimp'?! Do you want to get smashed, you biiitch?!"

"Wha…? No waaay, not you, Miss!"

"I thought I told you to use respectful language toward your teacher, Tomomi Tomonagaaa!"

"Fwaa?! What the hell?!" the girl—Tomomi—shrieked as

Kurumiya grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and began to administer her particular brand of punishment.

Glancing sidelong at her, Eiri squatted down beside Maina. "…Are you okay?" she asked.

"Ohh. Sowwy, I'b fide. Ah-ha-ha…" Maina sat up, her smile as weak as her apology.

"Really!" Ayaka put her hands on her hips. "Get it together, Crafty Cat. If we're gonna do this, I don't want to lose… And I can tell it's gonna be hard going, if you're already getting tripped up!"

"H-hey, Ayaka—" Kyousuke began.

"Miss Kamiya has the right idea, you bastaaaaaards!" Kurumiya shouted, interrupting Kyousuke's attempt to keep his sister Ayaka in check. Extracting the iron pipe from Tomomi's mouth, she pointed its saliva-covered tip up at the sun.

"The upcoming Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival is the most rigorous event of the year. There's no way you'll make it through in one piece with only half-hearted preparations. Listen up, piggies—fight like your lives depend on it. And when you strike, you strike to kill! Every other class is seriously coming to destroy you!! Those bastards in the upper classes are really formidable… They can finish off the likes of fragile new students in the blink of an eye… However! It's too early to give up. These past two weeks you've been spewing up waves of bloody vomit every day, and on the day of the festival, we're going to make those bastard upperclassmen do the same! This class has come together as the first first-year class in the history of the academy to aim for victory at the Purgatorium Athletic Festival, and you are going to deliver crushing defeat to every other class! Wreck 'em all!"

Absolute Ground Zero

YESTERDAY'S ENEMIES ARE TODAY'S FRIENDS

FIRST EVENT

Rank

S

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 1

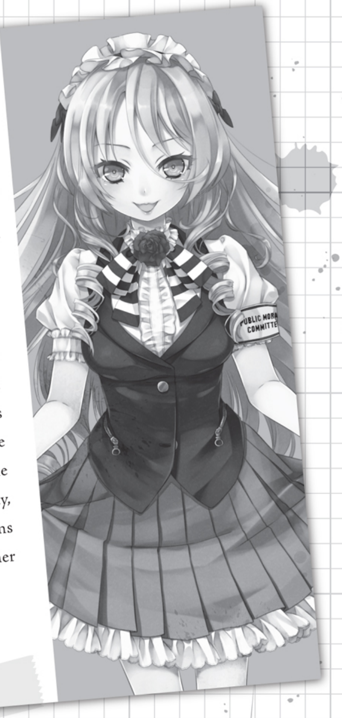
SAKI SHAMAYA

MURDER PRINCESS

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS A

Nickname : KILLING MANIA

Impalement, assault, strangulation, poisoning, immolation…a serial killer responsible for the murders of twenty-one people, male and female, young and old, via multifarious killing methods. A hard-core psychopath who loves murder in the same way that a bibliomaniac loves reading. Also a fundamentally levelheaded person with common sense, hiding one of the cruelest natures at the academy. During the athletic festival two years prior, she killed two upperclassmen, despite being a first-year student at the time. Boasting impressive intellectual prowess, physical ability, and combat skill, her violent outbursts are unmanageable. Seems to have been charmed by Kyousuke Kamiya during the Summer Death Camp; that is her sole vulnerability to date.



Absolute Ground Zero

YESTERDAY'S ENEMIES ARE TODAY'S FRIENDS

FIRST EVENT

—The Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival.

Held in the middle of September, it was the first event to assemble the whole student body together. A total of six classes, from first-year Class A to third-year Class B, would complete a series of matches arranged by the academy, and in total nearly one hundred murderers would compete for points, aiming for overall victory.

Apparently, the athletic festival was even more dangerous than the Summer Death Camp, and usually there were many casualties. According to Kurumiya, several students had died in "incidents" during prior matches. Three first-years last year, two first-years and two upperclassmen the year before that… How many students would meet their end this year? Kyousuke didn't even want to think about it.

"Please let me survive! Please don't let anyone kill me!" As he accepted his Daily Special Garbage Breakfast Set, Kyousuke prayed to the merciless gods.

After completing the morning training routine that had temporarily replaced their usual manual labor, everyone had gathered in the cafeteria.

Ayaka, who was behind Kyousuke in line, patted his back. "It's fine, it's fine! We have you in our class, big brother, and that means we're the strongest. The other classes are no threat at all! They may be upperclassmen, and murderers, but you'll take them all out, for sure."

"Take them out? Now look…"

"Quite right, Miss Ayaka!"

A third person shoved his way between the grimacing older brother and his smiling younger sister. A handsome boy with hair dyed light brown—Shinji Saotome, the Necrophiliac Strangler, who had throttled two girls before coming to the academy.

Shinji smiled graciously. "There's no murderer as fiendish and brutal as your older brother, after all. With twelve kills, the most of any first-year student, and a reputation as a total lady-killer, he's the academy's foremost fiend! He's the number-one person I wouldn't want to make enemies with, but also the number-one most reassuring ally to have. And since we also have me, the guy who all the ladies wish would embrace them, altogether I'd say—"

"Shut up." A female student delivered a flying kick into Shinji's leg, interrupting his self-indulgent boasting. A rust-red ponytail and narrowed, crimson eyes: Holding her tray with both hands, Eiri looked down at Shinji—who had collapsed with a shout—and then spat, "… You'd be better off dead."

"Awww…" Shinji bemoaned the spilled breakfast in front of him, then looked up at Eiri in surprise. "Huhhhh?! Isn't it a little strange to suddenly kick someone and say 'You'd be better off dead'? Are you a demon or something? What the hell did I do?!"

"Nothing," Eiri answered nonchalantly as she poured water into her cup. "You didn't do anything. But I thought you might. You've messed with us all along and shamelessly stuck your nose where it doesn't belong, Shinji, you pervert. Should I cut you down right now?"

"Now, now, don't be snappy. The athletic festival is a battle between classes, is it not?"

"……Hmph." Somewhat pacified, Eiri pressed her lips into a pout.

—*That's right.* The athletic festival was a contest between classes, so all their classmates would be their teammates. They had no choice but to try to get along—at least to a certain extent—with Shinji and the other hostile students. The many hazards presented by the event made it an utter necessity.

Perhaps because Eiri reluctantly understood this fact, she turned away in a huff. "Yeah, yeah, I get it… If Kyousuke says so, then I guess I'll give it a try."

"Huh?" Shinji blinked in surprise upon realizing she'd dropped the issue without resistance. "You seem to have changed somehow, Miss Eiri… Did something happen with Mr. Kamiya during summer vacation?"

"No, nothing happened."

"…Suspicious. Even the way you said that is extremely suspicious! Hmmm, could it be *that*? You started dating Mr. Kamiya, didn't you?"

"Wha—" Eiri froze, speechless.

Watching her face quickly grow red, Shinji cried "Bingo!" and snapped his fingers. He stood up, stroking his chin. "I see, I see… So even Mr. Kamiya, who had amassed quite the harem, has finally settled down with one girl! My goodness, congratulations. Oh, by the way, Miss Eiri, have you and Mr. Kamiya already done it?" he asked.

"Die!" Eiri slapped Shinji's cheek as hard as she could. Shinji fell over with a groan, and Eiri kicked his head and then stepped on it. "C-creep! You're full of shit! What the hell do you think you're doing, intentionally misinterpreting things?! I haven't even confessed my love yet… D-don't ask weird things! I'll kill you, you bastard!!"

"Calm down, Eiri, that's too much!"

"Tee-hee. When you say *yet*, does that mean you're planning to do it in the future? You're so easy to predict, Eiri, as expected of someone so naive…"

"Hold up! What are you even doing to Shinji, you uggo?!" The fashion-focused blonde wearing an abundance of makeup—Tomomi Tomonaga—slipped past Kyousuke (who was pacifying Eiri) and Ayaka (who was standing there grinning), and smashed into Eiri with a yakuza kick.

"Gyah?!" Eiri, who had been engrossed in harassing Shinji, was toppled by the sudden attack.

"…Owww," Shinji whined. "How dare you mistreat my precious face?!"

"Uh—yeah! What is even your deal?! There's no way I'll forgive you for laying a hand on my man… You're pissing me off!" Tomomi declared. "So step the hell off, tiny tits!"

"Wha—?" Eiri raised an eyebrow to meet Tomomi's abuse with an indomitable glare. "Shut up, you imbecile, and learn how to talk! What the hell does *uggo* mean anyway?!"

"It's fuckin' *UGG-LEE!*, duh. Don't you know anything? Your stupid is showing! Kyah-ha-ha-ha! And speaking of showing… Check out those undies!" Tomomi pointed.

"……?!"

Eiri rushed to fix her skirt.

Oonogi with the dreadlocked hair, who was holding a hand above his eyes to get a better look, and Usami, who was making binoculars with both hands, both dropped their arms in disappointment.

A sigh escaped Kyousuke's mouth. "Looks like our class doesn't have a bit of unity…"

"…Of course not." Eiri stood up, adjusting her clothes, and crossed her arms hopelessly. "A group that's been quarreling since school started won't suddenly join hands in harmony. With that history, I think it's going to be tough going."

"Hmm. Well, that's true, but—"

"All the more reason! All the more reason, everyone!" Shinji interrupted, cutting off Kyousuke's hesitation with confidence. Spreading both arms theatrically, he looked around at his classmates assembled in the cafeteria. "There are two weeks remaining until the athletic festival. Let's all join hands peacefully and find strength in our unity! In order to defeat the other classes and beat the upperclassmen into silence. We are aiming for total victory—now is the time for solidarity!"

Speaking with a ceremonial flourish, Shinji flashed his dazzling teeth. The mark from the slap that remained on his cheek didn't exactly match up with the rest of the image, though…

X X X

“At any rate, they’re weird, aren’t they?” Shinji muttered, as Tomomi, who was to his left, gave him some of her Daily Special Garbage Set Meal.

Kyousuke, seated across from the two, asked, “What’s weird?”

Shinji looked up at the ceiling, which was filthy and jam-packed with graffiti. “The events at this school. Purgatorium Remedial Academy is a place meant to reform us murderers, right? And yet, why should things be this extreme…? Miss Kurumiya was yelling ‘Kill ’em!’ and other things, like it was normal.”

“You know, you got a point!” Tomomi agreed. “It’s kinda like she doesn’t even want to reform us at all? I mean, if it was really that chill for us to murder one another, chicks like me would eat you alive. I’d chop you to bits!” She stabbed the air with a chopstick, pretending it was a weapon.

Eiri, who was sitting directly across from Tomomi, raised an eyebrow. “…Huh? Do you have that kind of strength? You look really weak.”

“—Huh?” Tomomi’s hand stopped. Within her eyes, which were adorned with false eyelashes and mascara, shone a dangerous light. “Hold up, girlfriend, you doubting me? Killing is, like, super easy.”

Her lips, shiny with gloss, were parted, revealing pink gums. Tomomi—this girl who looked like nothing more than a pretty face—continued as if she was speaking the obvious truth. “Even weak girls like me can totally spontaneously kill someone if we get the urge. It’s like, we just don’t usually have the courage to bring ourselves to do it! I mean, it’s not like I went over this in my self-introduction or anything, duh.”

“O-oh…?” Kyousuke, who had been enrolled on false charges in this school full of murderers, had been entirely preoccupied with his own thoughts back then, so unfortunately, he didn’t recall most of the self-introductions. Eiri also wore a puzzled expression, perhaps because she didn’t remember, either.

Tomomi continued in a boastful tone, as if she was reciting a speech she had prepared earlier: “See, it’s like, I’m actually really, super-incredibly gutsy. Maybe you might recognize my screen name, Li’l Tomo? I was doing live broadcasts on a video site, but I hardly had any followers. And it was sooooo boring! Some bitch who was like a hundred times uglier than me was getting a thousand times more likes just for singing karaoke, and it was such a bummer that I thought about giving it up… And that's when the thought hit me! *It would be hella cool to live broadcast a murder, right?* Just like that!"

"Ah—" Ayaka, who had been eating her lunch to Kyousuke's left, spoke up. "I know this story! It was about a year ago, I think. A high school cam girl posted a video of herself stabbing a classmate to death with a knife, and there was a big uproar, right? It was all over social media and everything."

"Yeah, yeah, that's it—that was totally me!" Evidently very happy that someone had heard about her, Tomomi raised her voice in excitement. "I was super psyched when it happened! In an instant the rumors spread, and I got sooo many followers… At first I had viewers in the double digits, but by the end I was up in, like, the thousands! It was totally cuh-razy! It felt good, so good! Kyah-ha-ha! The comments and stuff were really angry, but I ignored all the haters and did it anyway! I was so excited, and I stabbed her so many times, and her insides all came out! I was such an amaaazing hit!! Right?! It's the best, even just remembering it now. Does that sound psycho? Kyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"" "………… " ""

Eiri and Kyousuke stared in silence at Tomomi, who was doubled over in laughter.

…That's right. I can't believe I forgot. There are a huge number of people like this *here. Psychopaths who will snatch away strangers' lives without question, hesitation, or complication…*

And it wasn't just the first-years. There were many among the second-and third-years as well.

How did we end up having to compete against that lot…? This is too awful.

Kyousuke, who was genuinely a normal person, trembled as he recognized anew the terror of the upcoming athletic festival. However, his murderous classmate had no way of knowing his true thoughts.

"Heh-heh, that's just like you, Tomomi!" Shinji laughed. "Full of cruelty that belies your outward appearance. However, in our class, we have the ace known as Mr. Kamiya, who killed twelve people, the most in our grade, right? To Mr. Kamiya, homicidal killers are just like tiny babies, so he'll take them all out for us in five seconds flat!"

"Huh? Wait, I'll do nothing of the—"

"Ha-ha-ha, right on! We're counting on ya, Kamiya! You may have laid a world of hurt on me before, but at the athletic festival, we're on the same team. So really cut loose and wreck 'em all for us!!"

"H-hee-hee-hee… Anticipating a great showing by Mr. Kyousuke Kamiya, the insane invincible homicidal killer…hee-hee-hee…"

Even Oonogi and Usami, who were lined up to Shinji's right, started to fawn over Kyousuke.

In reality, Kyousuke hadn't even killed one person, but thanks to his faulty criminal record, the expectations were high.

A chant of """Ka-mi-ya! Ka-mi-ya!""" had even started up.

"Wait… S-stop it! It's great that you all feel that way, but—"

"Ka-mi-ya! Ka-mi-ya! A'right! Ka-mi-ya!"

"Ayaka?! You were the one stirring this uuuppp?!" Kyousuke looked dejected as he tried to force his little sister to stop clapping to the beat.

Eiri mumbled, "…Don't let it get to you."

"…Oh no."

In the midst of the commotion, a female student sat alone at the edge of the table, restlessly picking at her breakfast. With chestnut-colored hair and flax-colored eyes, it was Maina, who had been scolded harshly by Kurumiya that morning. Sitting to the left of Ayaka, Maina stayed quiet, her eyes cast downward as she squeezed her small body into an even smaller ball, doing her very best not to draw any attention—

"But the problem is what to do with Maina, you know."

"Fweeeh?!"

At Shinji's words, Maina jumped. She upset the dish in her hand and splashed Usami, who was sitting across from her, with miso soup.

"Hee-hee?!"

"So-so-so-so-so-sowwy! I-IIII-I, I—"

"Hush, Crafty Cat. Just try to calm down." Ayaka's words poured over Maina like cool water.

With wide eyes, Maina said, "…I-I'm sorry," and stiffly sat back down.

Ayaka and Shinji sighed together.

"Are you really that timid? That's why you're going to fail!"

"Still acting like this at such a crucial moment… It makes my head hurt. What a troublemaker you are."

"O-oh dear…" Maina hung her head, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Usami, now covered in miso soup, stared at her with soupy eyes through the gaps in his bangs.

Maina squeezed her eyelids shut tightly and raised her head earnestly. "R-really, I'm sorry! I'm clumsy and a coward, an idiot and a total crybaby. I'll probably just get in everyone's way! But I'll try my hardest and keep—"

"Just give it a rest already!" Tomomi interrupted. "It's so pointless to even try—you'll just get in the way."

"…Huuuh?" Maina gaped.

Winding her hair around her fingers, Tomomi continued in an exasperated tone, "You practically killed Arata and Kagerou, yeah?

And at the Summer Death Camp you even, like, almost bumped off some upperclassmen. You're totally terrifying! So just…do whatever. It's cool—nobody cares. But if you get the rest of us tangled up in your shit like you did this morning, we'll be totally screwed. Get it, you unbelievable moron?!"

"Eeek?! Y-yeeeeees! Oh gosh…" Maina's body trembled at the merciless browbeating.

Kyousuke finally couldn't stand it any longer and struck the table as he stood up. "Hey!" he shouted. "Don't talk to her that way—"

"Ah, I'm pooped! I'm completely exhausted, really!"

A succession of new students shuffled into the cafeteria. Leading them was—

"You'd think he could cut us some slack and not go over time on the first day of practice, right?! That's why Mr. Busujima is so unpopular… You guys think so, too, right?"

—a girl wearing a jet-black gas mask and headphones. Following behind this girl, who stood out conspicuously even at this school with its many strange students, were—

"Oh-ho-ho. Yes, you're right. I hate men who are careless about the time."

"…No way. The important thing about men is the flavor. Aside from that, nothing else really matters."

"Nay, what should be required of men is strength! Isn't that right, Azrael? Heh-heh-heh."

—a huge girl with a flour sack on her head, a little girl with glittering canines, and a boy talking to his right arm, smiling boldly—in other words, more weirdos.

"What's this?" Shinji said in a quiet voice. "It appears our 'enemies' have arrived…"

The new students were affiliated with first-year Class B, one of the classes that Kyousuke's first-year Class A would encounter at the athletic festival. The appearance of their closest rivals kindled new hostility in the students.

"We're all the same—freshies, I mean—so at the very least I won't lose to them, even if I die! I'll crush 'em!"

"H-hee-hee… Yesterday's enemies are today's friends, and yesterday's friends are today's enemies… Hee-hee-hee."

"…Oh yeah. I'm totally getting fired up! I'm gonna go all out."

"…Let's see. Even though they're people that we're always close with, at the athletic festival they become our mutual enemies. In that case, there's nothing to do but eliminate them! I'm hardening my heart toward you, Renko!"

"Ohh, for GMK to be our enemy, that sucks. Why did I have to be in Class A…?" "You're wrong, Kousaka. Think about it the other way! You can do anything you want to your enemies. In other words—" "All-you-can-grab boobies?!"

"Yes. We. Can!"

"Woooooooooooooooooo!"

"……The worst."

"Oh dear…"

The students of Class B glared back as the Class A students got more and more worked up. A dangerous atmosphere filled the room, the rules of the class-versus-class battle athletic festival giving rise to tension and discord between the groups.

The athletic festival held by the Purgatorium Remedial Academy was a genuine, serious smashup.

And as far as people trying to get on good terms with their opponents—

"Morning, Kyousuke! Morning, Eiri, Maina, and Ayaka!"

—there was just one person. Wearing a black gas mask, she completely ignored the atmosphere of the room and, bounding up to Kyousuke, embraced him from behind with a squish.

"Waah?! S-stop that, you idiot… You're heavy!"

"*Kksshh*. It's because they're so big. Isn't it nice? Go ahead and get your fill! Here, here." The female student laughed lewdly and pressed her breasts into his back.

It was a sensation that surprised him no matter how many times he experienced it. With the blended scents of sweat and soap added in, Kyousuke's power of reason was starting to shake loose.

"Aaaaaahhh, geez! Enough already, get off me, Renko. You don't have to hug me every time we meet. And stop pressing your boobs against me!"

"I told you. If I stop doing that, I'll lose my defining character trait, won't I?"

"Don't worry about it. You'd have plenty to stand on as a character even if your boobs disappeared. How many times are you gonna make me say that?!"

"If it'll stand up just fine even if my boobs disappear, then go ahead and get me pregnant! How many times are you gonna leave me unsatisfied?!"

"Don't say that!"

""""…………""""

Lots of eyes were glued to Kyousuke and Renko, who were yelling and making a scene.

"…*Hahh*," Eiri sighed and pressed on her temple. "You really can't read the room, can you? Don't you understand the situation we're in?"

"Of course I do! This is the time when we all enjoy breakfast together while I tease Eiri with boob jokes, right? Wowww, your rack is fantastic today, as always! It hasn't grown a bit."

"Ah, right, right. You don't understand at all… Your *head* hasn't grown a bit."

"Ehh?! Did you say *head*?!"

"—Miss Renko Hikawa." A quiet voice called out to Renko as she bantered with Eiri in their usual way. She turned to see Shinji standing with his hand on his chest.

"Good morning. This is the first time that we have spoken directly like this, is it not? I am Shinji Saotome. Truthfully, I have been curious about you for a long time… I was thinking I would love to speak with you sometime. My, what a charming gas mask!"

"……Huh?"

Kyousuke and Eiri were shocked as Shinji began making a pass at Renko.

"For a long time… What are you spitting out convenient phrases like that for, you faker."

"Seriously. Isn't this the guy who called her 'the crazy bitch in a black gas mask'? What kind of turnabout is this?"

"Heh-heh-heh. Come now, you two. I'm not the kind of small-minded man who judges a girl only on her outward appearance, you know! At the outset, I was shaken by her incredible getup, but…I was enchanted by the beauty of the private face hidden beneath the mask—"

"Ah. You saw my bare face, did you?"

"……I did."

"Isn't that still part of my outward appearance?"

Come to think of it… Before summer vacation, when Renko had used brute force to stop Ayaka's rampage, she had, sure enough, let the curious onlookers see her bare face. That peerlessly beautiful visage that ordinarily could not be seen due to the gas mask…

"Oh dear, have I exposed your secret? …I'm terribly sorry," Shinji continued. "But I had never dreamt that you could possibly be so beautiful."

"Right on! Me too, I was really shocked back then!" Oonogi, breathing wildly and leaning forward, shoved his way into the conversation. "To be honest, I thoughtcha were just a big-boobed pervert, but after the veil was lifted, yer a top-class beauty, aren'tcha! With that style 'n' those looks, and an amazing rapper to boot. It's too much—I'm even thinkin' of cheatin' on Eiri with you. What about you, Usami?"

"………"

Usami, who had been pulled into the conversation, stood up and swept aside his long bangs. “That’s right. I appreciate a great pair of legs, but I love enormous breasts even more. Until now, I’ve been all in over Eiri because of her cute features, but I’m compelled to change my preference now that I’ve seen your bare face. I adore you, Renko—I’ve become a fan. Please allow me to lick your cleavage.”

“Fwa?! That’s the first time I’ve heard you talk normally, Kagerou!! But you’re so nasty! The stuff you’re saying is seriously gross!” Tomomi was disgusted.

Across from her, “…Tch,” Eiri clicked her tongue. “You can all just die. And anyway, aren’t you forgetting? She’s affiliated with Class B, our sworn enemies. What are you doing, trying to make ties with her?”

“Eeeeeehh?!” Renko let out a hysterical cry in response to being forsaken. “What the hell, it’s fine, isn’t it?! The competition hasn’t even started yet!”

“It’s not fine. If we’re friendly before the games, it’ll be that much harder to fight when the time comes.”

“Huh. I’m not worried about that, but…Eiri, aren’t you being even more confrontational than usual?”

“Naturally. You are my enemy.”

“……Enemy? Not of your class, but of you?”

“I’m afraid so, Miss Renko…” Shinji looked sadly at Renko, who was staring at Eiri with her head tilted in confusion. “Me in Class A and you in Class B. It seems our love was never meant to be… Alas, it’s just like the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*! Innocent, pure hearts rent asunder by the storm known as the athletic festival, ephemeral and fleeting—”

“Hey, hey, Kyousuke.” Leaving Shinji alone in his excitement, Renko turned to Kyousuke. “The athletic festival is a class-versus-class battle, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And all classes aside from your own are the enemy, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmm. Well, wanna *join forces*?”

“Uh……”

At Renko’s proposal, Kyousuke’s eyes widened.

“Let’s form an alliance between your first-year Class A and our first-year Class B.”

“……Seriously?”

“Of course! What do you think, everyone?” Renko jumped up on the empty table and looked around at the students in the cafeteria. “The athletic festival is a ruthless competition between six classes in total. If you go into it the normal way, there are five rival classes you’re fighting against, four of which are upper classes, right? And all the upperclassmen have experienced the athletic festival before, but us first-years have not. Do you think we stand a chance, fighting with such a serious handicap? Past results should make the answer clear."

The number of past victories for first-years totaled exactly zero. This was the merciless, overwhelming fact.

Renko paused a moment, allowing a faint uneasiness to arise in the chests of her audience, before continuing. "So let's join forces. Let's combine the strengths of two classes and make up for the difference in experience! That way, we'll only be up against four rival classes, and with double the fighting potential! And after we do away with our biggest enemies in the upper classes, our two classes will be left to contend for victory…right? Don't our chances of winning seem much better this way than if we try a direct assault? Okay, everyone —"

Renko's voice grew more and more passionate as she replaced their anxiety with hope. She pumped her fist in the air and shouted, "Win the athletic festival with me! It doesn't matter one bit whether you're in Class A or Class B. Together as *first-years*, let's get the better of the upperclassmen! And let's carve a brilliant record of an unprecedented *first-year victory* into the history of Purgatorium Remedial Academy! YEAH, let's concentrate our power! Let's defeat all those bastards! Sorry, you're not a winner! We, we're a lot of winners!"

""""

her face, the directness she had shown with Ayaka as an opponent, and her impressive final exam grades. All around the astonished Kyousuke, students who had, just a few minutes prior, seethed with hostility now stood enjoying themselves together.

"…Hmm. I wonder if it's going to be that easy. It'll be fine if the teachers permit it, but…" Eiri's subdued comment evaporated in the face of GMK's intense lyrics.

In the end, the live performance put on by Renko and her groupmates in Fuckin' Park went on almost until the end of breakfast—and for the duration, there was no break in the cheering.

× × ×

"Okay, everyone! I proposed the idea of our alliance to the teachers."

It was after school on the same day. Renko, who was visiting the first-year Class A classroom, had come to deliver a progress report.

"Really? That was fast… Well, how did it go?"

"Miss Kurumiya was sour on the idea, but when I brought up Busujima's doping—his strengthening agents and steroids, stimulants and painkillers—and used that as leverage to negotiate, she seemed more open to the idea!"

"Doping… If this was an ordinary athletic festival, that would disqualify you, but I guess anything goes here. And that includes murder. We've got to worry about being crippled or killed."

Even though murder was grounds for having points deducted, it wouldn't get you kicked out right away—it was certainly a worrisome situation. And since, apparently, there were casualties every year, it was obvious that nothing would be off-limits.

"Oh dear… I wonder if we're really going to be allowed to fight together…"

"Sure. It should be okay, right?" Renko reassured Maina, who seemed as though she couldn't help but be anxious. "It looks like the rankings for the athletic festival are directly tied to the teachers' evaluations. Both Miss Kurumiya and Mr. Busujima ought to cooperate if it's for the sake of their classes. Unlike the Summer Death Camp, the teachers are in the same boat as us for the athletic festival."

"…I see."

Thinking about it that way, it was somewhat reassuring. To have those who had, until now, instilled such extreme fear into them suddenly turn to allies was inspiring. If they would really turn, that is…

"Oy, Renko! And Kyousuke Kamiya, too."

Speak of the devil. Kurumiya appeared in the classroom, calling for Kyousuke and Renko.

"Come here. I've got business with you two."

"Huh… Me too?"

"*Kksshh.* Of course. You seem to be the leader of first-year Class A, after all. It's the natural course of things that you would be called in along with me, the person who proposed the alliance."

"Leader… Is that so?"

"Well, isn't it? You've killed the most, and all."

"Hey—"

—I haven't killed anyone, he very nearly replied. His other classmates, besides Eiri, waved good-bye, saying things like "See you later, leader" and "We're counting on you, captain."

Kyousuke followed after Renko, feeling melancholy as he left the classroom.

"Miss Kurumiya! Miss Kurumiya!" Renko engaged amiably with Kurumiya, who was walking quickly down the hallway. "Did you think about the union between our classes?"

"It's under consideration. I'm waiting on the other party."

"Huh? Isn't that conversation what we're going to—"

"No. This is a separate matter."

Renko was disappointed by Kurumiya's response. "*Kksshh?!* A separate matter?"

"

come to see me?! My murderer friend Kiri? Or maybe the cleaner Ryou? Cannibal Corpse Kuchiha? Oh, could it be Sugar Cult Satou? Or possibly someone I wouldn't expect, like the Eyes Set to Kill strangling sisters—"

"Renkoooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Just then, the door of the reception room slammed open, and Renko was snatched up by the figure that came flying out of the room.

× × ×

"Aaahhhhhh?!"

A person leaped at Renko from the reception room. Holding her down and squeezing her body tightly, she rolled around on the floor, rubbing her face in Renko's abundant bosom.

"It's been so long—it's been half a yeeeaaar! I wanted to see you—I wanted to see you so muuuch! I'm sooo sorry I haven't been able to come see you before now. I'm really, really sorry! I'm in trouble, you see—I'm under contract and I've made no progress at aaalllllll! Comfort me, Renko! Soothe my splintered heeeaaart, Renkoooooooooo!"

"Eh? Ehhh?! Eeehhhhhh?!" Renko, lying on her back, looked extremely confused. "Ma—" She stared up at the delirious reveler.

"*Mamaaaaaa!*" she shouted and embraced the woman back. "It's you, Mamaaaaaa—it's been so long! I wanted to see you the whole time, too! Don't tell me you came just to see me; I'm so happy! I'm too happy, Mamaaaaaa!"

"...........Huh?" Kyousuke gaped at the frolicking pair. *Mama. Mother. Renko's mother. In other words*— "Y-you mean th-that person…gave birth to Renko…?"

"Indeed," Kurumiya nodded. "She is Murder Maid's creator."

"……Seriously?"

Kyousuke stared in blank amazement at the woman. Wearing a brand-name suit and a white lab coat, she had the same beautiful silver hair as Renko, but it was messily cut to shoulder length, and the ends stuck out in every direction.

"—Phew!" Eventually, the woman let go of Renko and stood up, looking satisfied. "My goodness, I'm so happy! Your body is soft and feels so good… Heh-heh-heh! And you smell sweet and nice, ah… If I could, I would hug you for ten more hours, but I think darling Hijiri would yell at me! I suppose I can show a little restraint…for now."

"……?!"

As the woman turned, Kyousuke caught sight of her face, and his breath caught in his chest. She was so beautiful it was frightening. Her dazzling white skin was like porcelain, and it shone under the fluorescent lights, making her appear almost wet. And then there were her fine, elegant eyebrows; and her eyelashes so long they cast shadows; and her high, dignified nose; and those glossy, peach-colored lips…

It was all exactly like Renko. As though Renko, just as she was now, had simply gotten older and become an adult.

"Huh?" The woman's ice-blue eyes seized on Kyousuke, who was still frozen in place, staring. She narrowed her eyes, a flicker of unrest in them. After glaring at Kyousuke for a short while, she growled. "…I…can't see."

The woman furrowed her brow, then got down on her knees and started feeling around on the floor. "Glasses, glasses—" Apparently her eyesight was poor.

"Mama, you dropped them!" Renko said, holding out a pair of glasses.

Taking her glasses from her daughter's hand, the woman pulled herself together and stood up. "Well, they're not prescription anyway."

They're fashion glasses?! What was with getting down on the ground just now?!

Since he couldn't very well make fun of someone he had just met, Kyousuke wasn't sure how to react. When he looked to Kurumiya for help, she glared back at him with eyes that said, *Don't ask me.*

As Kyousuke stewed in silence, the woman let out a disappointed sigh. "…*Whew*, it's no good—he doesn't even have any comeback skills. He's a failure, a failure, I say. A guy like that isn't worthy of Renko! He should just quietly step aside."

"Eeeh?!" Renko was taken aback. "No way!" she shouted. "He's my lover!"

"Loveeeeeer?!" The woman grabbed Renko's shoulders. "What do you mean?! I never heard anything about you moving that fast!"

—Yeah, me either.

The woman continued interrogating Renko. "Hey, how far have you gone? How much have you done with Kyousuke?!"

The woman called him by name even though he had not introduced himself.

After hesitating a moment, Renko wriggled her body suggestively. "…I-I'm embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?!" The woman's voice cracked into falsetto. "W-wwww-wait! Please, wait! Have you already done things that are embarrassing and hard to confess?! I'll kill—No, I'm not angry, so tell me. Look, you can say it in a voice only I can hear. Tell me as a secret."

"O-okay… I understand, Mama. Well…"

Bringing her exhaust port close to the woman's ear, Renko began to whisper. It wasn't audible to Kyousuke and Kurumiya, but as she listened to Renko's words the woman's expression turned from pensive to perplexed, and from perplexed to shocked, and from shocked to serious, and from serious to ashamed, and from ashamed to angry, and from angry to…

"Okay. I'll hear what he has to say as well."

Blank. The woman's face had lost all expression as she approached Kyousuke.

Kurumiya quickly distanced herself, and Renko tilted her head. "…Mama?"

A chill ran up Kyousuke's spine.

This presence… There it is again. Bloodlust.

The woman advanced until she stood close, staring directly at him. "Kyousuke Kamiya, is it?" she asked in a quiet, emotionless voice.

"Y-yes…," Kyousuke answered timidly.

"Hmmm…" The woman looked him over from head to toe. Kyousuke felt unusually self-conscious. He fought a strong urge to turn tail and run.

Instead, as the woman's gaze crawled wordlessly over him, Kyousuke took a long hard look at her in return. The more he looked, the more he thought she really did look just like Renko. The overall impression was different thanks to the glasses, but he could think nothing but that Renko had just grown up. She looked to be in the first half of her twenties and wasn't wearing much makeup, but despite that, she had a girlish glow.

Compared to the endlessly cheerful Renko, she had a somewhat more composed air, possessing the charm and style of an adult. More than anything, what drew his eyes were…

H-huge…!

Resting on top of their special guest's gently folded arms were two massive bulges. Her breasts were amazing and also looked as if they belonged to a grown-up Renko. Her shirt strained to contain them, and it seemed as though her buttons would pop off at any second. As he looked them over, Kyousuke's—

"Is it this?"

The next moment, the woman did something unbelievable. Suddenly, with her right hand, she forcefully *grabbed Kyousuke's crotch.*

"……?!"

Kyousuke was shocked silly, of course, but Renko and Kurumiya were also dumbfounded by this behavior.

Angrily, the woman grabbed hold of the part in question and squeezed. “So this is what defiled my daughter…”

“Ah!”

The woman’s cryptic words were as impossible to decipher as her behavior.

Defiled Renko? What did? …I did?

Kyousuke was utterly confused.

Squeezing his nether region in a vise grip, the woman smiled. “I heard from Renko, Kyousuke! I heard that you’ve been doing this and that and even the other thing with her! Some nerve you have, hmm?”

“……Huh? I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t play duuumb!”

“Yeowwwww?!”

There was no use in arguing as the strange woman twisted his plums.

“You r●pe demon! I’ve got proof that you defiled my daughter! My pure daughter, such…s-such obscene and shameless things she shouldn’t even know the words for! But you educated her!! You gave my daughter some sex education, didn’t you?! That’s for damn sure!”

“Huh?! No, it’s the other way around. She went after me—”

“No talking baaack!”

“Owwwwww!!”

“Moreover, from what I heard, it sounds like you don’t even think about Renko’s feelings. What the hell is the idea behind dating someone even though you don’t like them?! You’ve got to be joking! So your only goal is her body, after all, you piece of trash! To savor her as you wish, and then cast her aside when you get bored?! My daughter is not chewing gum! If we’re comparing her to something, she’s a marshmallow. She’s a sweet, delicious marshmallooow!”

“Mama, stop it already! Kyousuke didn’t do anything wrong, I just embellished my story a bit! We’re not even dating yet!” Renko tried to pacify her, but her words did not reach the enraged woman’s ears.

Meanwhile, Kurumiya calmly puffed on a cigarette.

“I don’t approve! I don’t approve of you, Kyousuke Kamiyaaa! I’d rather die than give my daughter to a guy like you! Don’t you ever lay a hand on Renko again. Don’t go near her. Don’t talk to her! If you do, I’ll tear this right off—”

The woman stopped moving. She slackened her right hand just a bit. “…Huh? Is it my imagination? It’s gradually getting…hard—”

“Gya—?!” Kyousuke shouted as the woman began to move her fingers around quizzically. He grabbed her wrist, trying to stop her. “Uwagh?! Wh-what are you doing?! This is assaaaaaault!”

He had meant to tear her hand off him, but the woman resisted frantically. That brought about even more excitement and tension and irritation, snatching away any hope of maintaining his composure…

“Uaaahhhhhh?!”

The situation devolved into a mad grapple, and the next thing he knew, Kyousuke had fallen down in the corridor along with the woman.

“Kyousuke?!” “Reiko?!”

Renko and Kurumiya shouted. And then—

““…………””

—Silence.

Kyousuke had fallen facedown, and his head was buried in something warm and nice smelling. What’s more, both of his hands had, for some reason, grabbed hold of something strangely soft.

““…………””

A cold sweat broke out on Kyousuke’s back. If he remembered correctly, he had had such an experience only once before.

When he timidly lifted his face to look, sure enough, his gaze was met by a pair of ice-blue eyes that were open so wide it looked as though they might fall out. Kyousuke’s face had been buried in the woman’s stomach, and his hands held her enormous breasts.

“Ha, ha-ha-ha…” Laughter was audible. By the time he realized that it was coming from his own stiff mouth, it was too late. Totally befuddled, Kyousuke stared at the blushing woman’s face above him. “…F-fair turnabout?”

As he spoke, almost unconsciously, he squeezed his fingers a little.

“Re, Re, Re-Re-Re, Re—” The woman’s mouth flapped open and closed like a fish on land as Kyousuke rubbed her breasts. Tears welled up in the outer corners of her eyes, which wavered with shame and anger.

“Renjiiiiiiiiiiii! Crush th-this…th-this perveeeeeert!”

Renko’s mother yelled, and the next instant *an enormous figure smashed through the wall of the reception room* and, with one humongous arm, grabbed Kyousuke by the collar and slammed him against a corridor window.

“Gah?!”

It had all happened in the blink of an eye, too fast for Kyousuke to follow. It was as if he had been hit by a truck. Pressed between the window and the arm, he was being crushed to death. Cracks radiated across the glass behind his back, and his body went limp.

"Wh-what—?"

"…………"

Kyousuke's field of vision was filled by an *ivory-white gas mask*. The opaque plastic viewport stared at him apathetically as rough fingers dug into his neck and collar, strangling him—

"Quit it."

Instantly, the arm restraining Kyousuke broke with a snap, and a sharp bone pierced through the skin, accompanied by a spray of blood. The arm dangled limply, and the crushing pressure eased.

"…………"

The man wearing the gas mask did not make a single sound. Silently, he stretched his undamaged arm out toward Kyousuke, who had crumpled to the floor of the hallway.

"—I told you to stop it."

Kurumiya grabbed the man's wrist to stop him.

His other arm had been broken by a blow from the iron pipe.

"…………"

The man was silent. He did not turn to look at Kurumiya.

Both of their arms were trembling with tremendous effort, proof that neither was about to give in. It appeared that their strength was evenly matched.

"Hey!" Kurumiya shouted. "Hurry up and stop this huge oaf, Reiko! What are you waiting for?!"

"……No."

"What did you say?"

"No waaaaaay!" The woman got up, protecting her chest with both arms. "Th-that boy touched my boo…bbbb, booooobs, he f…ffff-fondled them!! I'm not so softhearted as to smile and forgive a creep like that!"

"……Huh? Are you stupid? What am I supposed to do with a grown woman who cries like a baby when someone rubs her boobs—What? Once or twice at most? Your inexperience is showing."

"Shut up! And don't say that!! I-I won't forgive you…letting my secret out on top of letting him grope me. This doesn't end here! Kill 'immm, Renjiiiiii!"

"Huh?! Aggravating a virgin is so—Kuh?!" Still gripping the man's wrist, Kurumiya used her left leg to block the right leg that kicked out toward her. A rare bead of sweat appeared on her forehead.

The man drew back his leg and dropped into a crouch, readying himself for another assault.

"Mama!" Renko clung to the woman. "Stop it! Please, stop already! Don't kill Kyousukeee!" Renko's voice was strained and sounded like it would give out at any time.

Staring down at her entreating daughter, rubbing her gas mask against her, the woman looked confused. "…Renko?" A sigh escaped from her peach-colored lips. "—Renji, stop."

The instant the woman gave the order, the man stopped his attack. Without hesitation, he returned to a normal stance, standing upright in the corridor.

"………"

Kurumiya sighed in relief and let go of his wrist. She glared at his ivory-white gas mask. "Really, what unbelievable power… He's quite something even with the limiter on. Hey, can you stand, Kyousuke?"

"Y-yeah…somehow. Thanks, Miss…" Taking the hand extended toward him, Kyousuke staggered to his feet.

"Eh?" The woman's eyes widened. "You were attacked by Renji… and you're fine? It's just as I heard—you're really amazing… I see. You certainly have an outstanding talent. Even if you're awful on the inside," she added hatefully.

Behind the woman gaped an enormous hole in the wall between the reception room and the corridor.

The window into which Kyousuke had been slammed—even though it was specially made bulletproof glass—was spiderwebbed with pale cracks, practically solid white. It was proof of an unbelievable superhuman strength.

"………"

The man who had caused this disastrous scene had stood silent since he was told to stop and had not so much as twitched. His right arm, destroyed by Kurumiya's attack, dangled limply.

Partly because of the ominous gas mask, he seemed like the type who wouldn't feel human weakness—in other words, completely mechanical. His huge body, more than six feet tall, was covered with massive muscles, and his skin was packed with tattoos from the tips of his fingers all the way to the bottom of his chin.

On the chest of the T-shirt he was wearing were the characters GMK48. Kyousuke vaguely recognized the name of Renko's band, apparently(?).

"Uh, ummm—"

"Ahem."

Before Kyousuke could ask any questions, the strange woman stood up. Looking from the seated Renko to the man standing at attention and then to Kyousuke, she took a seat.

"…Excuse me. I lost my composure just now. I am Reiko Hikawa. I work as a researcher in the criminal underworld. I created Renko and the other Murderers' Murderers and am something of a mother figure to them."

Smiling, Reiko pushed the bridge of her glasses up. Her prescriptionless lenses reflected the light. “Now, recently I’ve heard that you’ve been seducing my daughter and treating her callously… I couldn’t just let that stand, so I hurried here. Are you prepared, Kyousuke Kamiya?”

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“Regarding the relationship between you and Renko, I’ve heard all about it from darling Hijiri, and I completely understand the situation.”

They had changed locations—and were now in the conference room on the new school building’s first floor.

Reiko, perched on the edge of a desk, recrossed her legs and continued, “The one-sided love that Renko has for Kyousuke is stopping my daughter’s murderous impulses, right? And so Renko is trying to make Kyousuke fall in love with her, and then kill him. But because this gigolo values his own life, he refuses to let his guard down, no matter how much time passes. Nevertheless, Renko is attractive, so he’s permitting himself to love only her body. He’s just using her feelings so he can play around as he pleases…and, that’s about the whole of it?”

“No, the last part is wrong.”

“Don’t play innocent!” Reiko slapped her palm down on the desk. “You must be joking, Kyousuke Kamiya! Isn’t it true that you went so far as to get in the bath with Renko, hmm? It’s crazy to believe that nothing happened. With my daughter’s erotic body right before your eyes, is there a man alive who wouldn’t make a move? Of course not!”

“But I didn’t make a move, though…”

“Are you saying my daughter’s not attractive, you bastaaaaaard?!”

Reiko rose halfway to her feet and loomed over to Kyousuke.

“Huh?!” Kyousuke sputtered as the woman’s face suddenly closed in.

“…Hey, deep down, you’re already madly in love with Renko, right? But since you’ll be killed once you admit to it, you’re desperately trying to bury your true feelings. That’s right, isn’t it? Heh-heh.”

“N-no way…” Kyousuke, being scrutinized so closely, averted his eyes without thinking. His heart was beating fast.

Calming his ragged breathing, Kyousuke answered, “I am, well…a totally ordinary, normal person! No matter how attractive she might be—”

“So she *is* attractive? Ah-ha, you think she’s attractive. In that case, why don’t you make a move, hmm? You’re holding back, after all, hmm? Hey, hey—"

"Stop it!" Renko interjected, pulling her murmuring mother away. "This is total entrapment, isn't it? Drawing his feelings out of him against his will like this won't satisfy me, Mom. I'm trying to get Kyousuke to say 'I love you' spontaneously, of his own free will. Nobody asked for your help!"

"Wha—" Reiko was at a loss for words. Staggering, she clapped both hands over her mouth. "Re…Re-Re-Re-Re, Renko…Renko didn't take my side, she took Kyousuke's! Im-impossible… Is this the rumored rebellious age? Oh, what should I do…what should I do, Renji? Your big sister Renko is acting strange!"

"………"

Waiting beside her, Renji did not answer. His broken arm in a sling, he watched Kyousuke and the others without the slightest movement. It seemed that her younger brother Renji, a "custom-made killing machine" just like Renko, differed from his older sister in that he barely expressed any emotion—and did not constantly open his mouth to say silly things.

"Hey, what should I do, Hijiri?!"

"I dunno." Reclining against the wall, Kurumiya cut her down with a curt reply. "Thinking is your job, after all. Don't ask me, super mom."

"Ehh, you're being mean. Baby body!"

"Fuck off and die."

If a student had been the one to make that remark, it would have been a bloodbath, but Kurumiya had just spit back a retort as though she was used to the banter.

Pressing her index finger against her temple, Reiko groaned. "Ohhh… I don't know, what should I do? It would solve the problem if my daughter's love would bear fruit, but I don't want to help…"

"Why not?!" Renko demanded.

Reiko smiled. "Because I'm not satisfied with Kyousuke."

"Eh—" Renko was at a loss for words. "Wh-what do you mean by 'not satisfied,' Mama?!"

"I mean just what I said. I don't like Kyousuke very much. I don't like him, so I don't want to hand my daughter over to him! If he seemed like a good boy, I would help you with all my might, and you'd be able to kill him just like that! Though it doesn't seem like I'm going to start to feel that way."

"Well then, well then!" Renko tugged at the hem of the white lab coat, clinging to Reiko, trying to make her understand. "If you come to like Kyousuke, that won't be a problem, right?! If you approve of Kyousuke—"

"No, no, no, no, ninety-nine-point-nine percent no."

"But why?!" Renko wailed.

Her mother smiled. "Because I'm not satisfied with Kyousuke."

"You said that already!"

Apparently she really did not like him.

Renko sighed, "*Kksshh…*" and hung her head. "Boo. Tell me why, Mama… You've never refused me like this. I love you, and I love Kyousuke, but you hate Kyousuke… It makes me sad that you hate him so much."

"Renko…" Reiko placed a hand on her daughter's head and gently tried to placate her. "Look here—I'm sad, too, you know? I'm sad, but it can't be helped. I think it's no good for Kyousuke to fall in love with you. He's trying not to fall for you, because you will kill him once he does. It's impossible to make someone like that come around."

"It's not impossible! When you give up, that's when you lose the match!"

"But if Kyousuke falls for you, that's when he loses his life!" Reiko made a troubled face. "What's to be done…? Honestly, I hadn't expected that you would be this madly in love. You're not even listening to what I'm saying. Oh, Hijiri, what should we do?!"

"Dunno," Kurumiya answered, exhaling purplish smoke. "If it's no good asking, how about ordering? If you really want something, Murder Maid can't defy you. It should work if you force her. Just say 'Give up on Kyousuke.'"

"Ehh, no way, such a drastic measure. What if my daughter hates me because of it, what then?"

"I dunno! Geez, you're a tiresome lot… Hurry up and decide what to do. I'm busy with preparations for the athletic festival now. I don't have time to waste on unnecessary—"

"…Athletic festival?" Reiko asked, allowing her puffed-up cheeks to deflate.

"Yeah. An event we're holding in two weeks. A dustup between all six classes… Whoever wins gets a raise, and the losers take a pay cut, so it's serious."

"……"

After contemplating this for a short while with a hand on her chin, Reiko asked, "Which class did you say you were in charge of again?"

"First-year Class A."

"And Renko's class is…?"

"First-year Class B."

"Okay, and Kyousuke's in which class?"

"My class. So what?"

"Well, Hijiri dear—"

Reiko's glasses shone. She narrowed her mischievous eyes.

"Could Renji and I participate in that event?"

"……What did you say?" Kurumiya asked quizzically.

Reiko, holding everyone's gaze, triumphantly continued, "As supporters for Renko's first-year Class B! And also, to fight. To fight against Kyousuke's first-year Class A. And then if Class A wins, I'll give Kyousuke my approval. If Class B wins instead, Renko will back off of Kyousuke. It'll be fun, right?"

"Ehhh?!"

It was an absurd proposal.

The two teens were taken aback, but their teacher simply blew a puff of smoke. "Ordinarily it would be impossible, but you always get VIP treatment. If you make your request directly to the board chairman, he'll probably try to accommodate you. However, Reiko," Kurumiya added belligerently, thrusting the tip of her burning cigarette toward the unruly parent, "do you really think you can win a battle after making me an enemy?"

Facing Kurumiya, Reiko folded her arms and threw out her abundant chest. "Eh? That's just like you, Hijiri, such amazing confidence. But too bad for you, this is my win. I'll defeat Class A and you with it, and I'll take my daughter back from Kyousuke!"

"Wait a minute!!" Renko slipped in between the two adults, who had already started to argue. "Don't go on talking about whatever you want! I want you to consider our feelings, too!"

"…Hmm? Aren't I taking them into consideration? You don't want to give up on Kyousuke. I want you to. If neither of us will surrender, then it's best to settle it with a contest. You like Kyousuke, don't you, Renko?"

"Yeah!"

"And you have faith in Kyousuke, don't you?"

"Yeah!"

"Then you must also believe that Kyousuke is going to win?"

"Y-yeah…"

"*And you, Kyousuke—*" Reiko shifted her gaze. "If you don't want to be separated from my daughter, you'd better try your hardest. *But if you do want to be separated, then just don't try at all.* Heh-heh. You're free to choose whichever option you like. But if you choose the latter, you'll probably be halfway killed by Hijiri. Though that's better than being killed by Renko, hmm?"

Staring at Kyousuke as if she could see the deepest part of his heart, Reiko smiled.

She meant to assess him. By watching his actions in the contest, she intended to suss out his true feelings toward her daughter.

"………"

Kyousuke, however, could not answer.

Reiko said nothing to this but narrowed her eyes, only to eventually move her gaze off Kyousuke. “Oh, and by the way, you can’t ease up on him either, Renko! Since you like Kyousuke, and especially since you believe in him, you must really try to destroy him. If he’s the kind of boy who can be so easily crushed, I’m certain it would happen sooner or later. Surely you’re anxious about Kyousuke’s true feelings toward you?”

“…Y-yeah. But Mama—”

“But?”

Renko shut her mouth and left her question unfinished. After a moment of restless fidgeting, she answered, “…N-nothing. I get it…if Mama says so, I won’t go easy.”

“Okay, well done! Good girl, good girl!” Reiko nodded and rubbed her daughter’s head. She smiled, showing sharp canines.

“—And that’s that. The athletic festival will be a fight between Hijiri, leading her first-year Class A, and me, leading first-year Class B, plus whatever other rabble. I’m telling you now, I won’t lose! I’m going to make you regret this. I’m going to utterly destroy you! Seducing my beloved daughter, sexually assaulting me… I’ll pay you back double! Ready yourself, Kyousuke Kamiya!”

“………..*Kksshh.*”

Beside Reiko, who was making her declaration of war, the giant wearing the ivory-white gas mask let out a faint breathing sound. His powerful gaze could be felt through the opaque viewport.

—Renji Hikawa.

Known as a Slaughter Maid, he was currently wearing a limiting device, but it was obvious he was a monster whose physical abilities rivaled even Renko’s own without her mask.

Th-this is the worst…

A joint effort was already out of the question. He now had much more to worry about than just the third-year students. Kyousuke prayed again to the merciless gods.

Reckless and Relentless

YESTERDAY'S FRIENDS ARE TODAY'S ENEMIES

SECOND EVENT

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 2

Rank A

ANJI GOSOU

SAVAGE SUKEBAN

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS A | **Nickname :** ARCH ENEMY

Former leader of the female biker gang Chaos Legions. When an altercation with another gang got out of hand, she killed four people by beating them and running them over. Her physical strength, honed in battle, is impressive, while her intelligence is somewhat lacking. However, her extreme vanity precipitates an exaggerated and haughty disposition.

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 3

Rank A+

MEI KUROKI

ICE QUEEN

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS B | **Nickname :** HEARTLESS

An emotionless person who has been unable to empathize with others from a young age. Because she has no understanding of human emotion, she performs calmly in any situation. She has killed only one person. However, her method of torture, forcing the victim to consume his own flesh and viscera, was particularly brutal; the victim's brain showed signs of atrophy due to acute terror.

Reckless and Relentless

YESTERDAY'S FRIENDS ARE TODAY'S ENEMIES

SECOND EVENT

"Hey, hey, heeeeeey! What are you gonna do when you get this tired?! Keep this up, and defeating the upperclassmen might as well be a dream within a dream. You don't even measure up to freshman Class B, you bastaaaaaards!!"

Six AM. A lisping, angry voice roared out over the still-dark grounds.

Just ahead of Kurumiya, who was providing harsh motivation, the students of first-year Class A jumped up and down as they circled a two-hundred-meter track, sketched out in quicklime.

They jumped onward, carrying twenty-two-pound sandbags and wearing hefty shackles. Their assignment was for each person to circle the track five times. One hour had passed since the start of morning training—the students were complaining about the overly rigorous exercise.

Shinji, tilting backward as he jumped, gasped for breath between words. "Why, do we…*ha*…have to…*ha*…*ha*…do this…kind of thing, Kamiya…*hahhh*…?"

"…Don't ask me," Kyousuke replied wearily, suffering more from mental fatigue than physical exhaustion. With a sigh, he recalled the events of the previous day:

The day after they had met Renko's mother, Kyousuke and the others had assembled before morning training and had heard shocking news at the first special morning assembly since they had entered school.

"Today we have some very unfortunate news to share with you. The teacher for first-year Class B, Mr. Kirito Busujima, has been bitten by one of his venomous pet snakes and is unconscious, in critical condition."

And that was not all. Stepping in for Busujima as temporary homeroom teacher would be—

"My name is Reiko Hikawa. Nice to meet you!"

—the person they had feared it would be. It seemed likely that Reiko had had a hand in Busujima's unfortunate fate. In addition, under the pretense of a student exchange, her companion, Renji, had enrolled in Class B. The two obviously had some connection to Renko, but regarding that particular subject, Reiko had only boasted, "There's a deeeeeep reason, deeper than mine and Renko's cleavage," in a flagrant attempt at deflection.

On top of that, Reiko had vetoed the collaboration between first-year classes. The friendly Renko also got entangled in the situation, and the atmosphere of the class had once again grown tense.

"What are you doing?!" Kurumiya yelled. "Pick up the pace, piggies! You've only just started!! After you're done with the leaning jumps, we'll move on to strength training with leg lunges, single-leg bends, Hindu squats, upper-body bends, wrestler bridges, push-ups, sit-ups, wall pushes, and more! And that's just the warm-up! I'll resuscitate you even if you faint, so you'd better give it everything you've got!"

Perhaps because she was burning with feelings of rivalry, Kurumiya's coaching had gotten even more severe, and Kyousuke and the others were now subject to grueling drills from morning until night.

Even though the students had been undergoing continuous physical training for half a year since matriculating at Purgatorium Remedial Academy, by the time they finished afternoon exercises, none could even take another a step.

Nearly hobbled by fatigue, today they began their first day of real hell—

"Aiiieee?!" Suddenly, a female student collapsed behind Kyousuke and the others. Dropping her sandbag, she lay facedown on the ground, gulping for oxygen. *"Hah…hah…"*

A few moments passed, but the girl did not get up.

"You there, Maina Igarashiiiiii!" Kurumiya yelled and threw the iron pipe at her.

"Gyan?!"

Taking the iron pipe to the back of the head, Maina cried out in agony. She tried to recover, but whether because she was flustered or tired, she wasn't able to properly lift the sandbag. "*Huph, huph*… hwaaahhh?!"

A second iron pipe came flying toward Maina's face as she fell over.

"*Gyah?!* Y-you'll knock my head oooffffff!!" Catching the pipe with her forehead, Maina writhed in pain on the ground.

Several nearby students stumbled over her collapsed body and went flying.

"Owww… Geez, again?! Be careful, Crafty Cat!"

"That's so majorly irritating! I'll beat the hell out of you next time you get in my way!! Don't fuck around, for real!"

Ayaka and Tomomi re-shouldered their sandbags and overtook Maina.

Eiri bounded up alongside her. "…Are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh gosh. S-sowwy… No pwobwem, I'm…"

"Hey, are you really all right? If it's too difficult, I'll lend you a hand—"

"No pwobwem, I said!"

Maina shouted at Kyousuke, who had made a U-turn out of concern for her. However, with a small "Ah," she immediately came to her senses and apologized in a fluster. "So-sowwy…but I'm fine! Kyousuke and Eiri, just leave me behind…please. I can't always rely on everyone's help, after all…when the real athletic festival happens, I don't want to hold the rest of you back!"

"Maina…"

"…Okay, I get it."

Eiri nodded and left Maina behind. Kyousuke, however, remained hesitant.

Blood was flowing down Maina's forehead from a gash left by the iron pipe. And that was not all. Her eyelids, cheeks, nose, lips… Having made more mistakes than anyone else, Maina had also sustained the most injuries and been carried to the infirmary time and time again. If this continued, it was obvious that Maina wouldn't make it through morning training.

But—

"Huph, huph…hwooooooh!"

What burned in Maina's eyes as she shouldered her sandbag was not death. Blazing there was a persistent fighting spirit that absolutely would not break, no matter how much she was injured. And so Kyousuke—

"…Do your best."

—with that, overtook Maina.

X X X

"Hnnngh, it's impossible. It's intolerable! It appears that we will meet our fates before we even reach the athletic festival. Miss Eiri, I'm exhausted…"

"…Oh really. Why not die?" They had finished morning training and were headed to the locker room. Eiri cursed nonchalantly at Shinji's whining.

Shinji stuck out his lower lip. "What's with that? Too cruel! It's cruel, right, Miss Ayaka?"

"You're right. Your incompetence is cruel. But if you're going to die, please wait until after you do something useful at the athletic festival. Tee-hee!"

Shinji's pleas to Ayaka had been met only by derisive rejection. "Harsher treatment than I got from Eiri?! Why, the mere implication is the height of indignity! My, my…" He shrugged his shoulders and looked behind him. "Miss Maina—"

But no one was there. "W-well, here's the infirmary," he continued anxiously. "So…I'm afraid I've got no alternative. Tomomi, it is truly atrocious, isn't it? The way everyone treats me so cruelly! Come by now and again to say a kind word—"

"Shut up."

"………..Huh?"

Shinji remained frozen, arms reaching out to embrace Tomomi.

"To-Tomomi…? Wh-why—?"

"Honestly, I'm getting so sick of your shit. Like, I literally cannot even believe you'd have the stones to pull out some crap like that after that exhausting morning workout. I mean, there's being an asshole, and then there's you, Shinji."

"……I'm sorry, what?"

"I think she's mad because you said you've 'got no alternative,'" Kyousuke offered.

Tomomi's face lit up enthusiastically. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's just like Kyousuke! He sooo totally gets how girls feel. He's a total dreamboat!" She suddenly grabbed hold of said boy's arm.

Shinji and Eiri—and of course Kyousuke, the one who had been grabbed—were all taken by surprise. "Eh?!"

Tomomi gazed up at Kyousuke, her body pressed close against his. "I've liked you since waaay back! For real! But you're so seriously popular! I never thought I had a chance. You're super cool. That's why you're so popular. *Squeee!*"

"Wait, I…"

Tomomi ignored Kyousuke's wincing and pressed her face close to his. "Doesn't killing just totally wear you out?" she continued passionately. "I mean, it's not like people die from the first stab. They reeeally struggle… I used a paring knife, and I must have stabbed that girl like ten times before she stopped breathing! It took some serious work, right? And you killed twelve people in one go! Kyousuke, you're soooooo cool!"

"Ha, ha-ha…th-thanks. Anyway, if you would just let go—"

"Get off of him, you bitch!" Just then, Eiri took hold of his opposite arm. Gripping it tight, as if she was going to pull Kyousuke away, she glared daggers at Tomomi. "A girl like you shouldn't touch Kyousuke. You'll get him dirty! Dirty girls should stick with dirty guys and dirty friends, and all be dirty together."

"Huh? What do you even mean by 'dirty'? Don't go acting like you're all innocent! Just look at you, pressing all up on him—even though you don't have anything there to press, Miss Tiny Titties! I guess it's just your attitude that's big, huh?" Tomomi pulled at Kyousuke's other arm, enthusiastically returning Eiri's verbal abuse in kind.

Stuck between the two, Kyousuke desperately tried to calm the girls down. "H-hey! Eiri and, umm…T-Tomomi, stop it! I mean, let go —"

"Kyaaah! Kyousuke totally said my name! I'm, like, so freaking out right now!"

"Hang on?! Are you going to start making passes at girls like this, too…? Do you have no class at all?!"

"That's right, that's right—it's cruel!" Shinji lamented. "Eiri and Maina and the rest were all taken, so I had to put up with Tomomi, but…snatching up even the leftovers, it's too cruel!"

"Fwaaa?! What do you mean by 'leftovers'! I absolutely cannot even stand you anymore, Shinji. That seals it—I'm switching over to Kyousuke."

"Aaaaaah?! I'm sorry, Tomomi! That was a lie just now, a joke, a figure of speeeeeech!!" Shinji grabbed the girl's arm, growing increasingly agitated.

"Tee-hee. You're very popular, aren't you, big brother?" Ayaka said, watching Kyousuke squirm with a dangerous look in her eyes.

"Yoohoo! Good work on your training, ladies and gentlemen of first-year Class A."

A familiar, friendly voice called out to them. When they looked, they saw Reiko standing there waving, clad in athletic clothes and accompanied by a group of students. However, she was still wearing her lab coat and had not removed her glasses.

The group had probably also just finished morning training, like Kyousuke and the others, and were headed to the locker room.

And the huge man wearing the ivory-white gas mask, who was mixed in with the others in first-year Class B—Renji Hikawa—was also there. His right arm, which had been broken by Kurumiya the day before yesterday, was still in a sling…

"Ah, hello… Good morning, Miss Reiko."

"There's no reason for you to call me *Mom*!"

"I didn't!" Kyousuke protested the baffling accusation.

Reiko's friendly smile vanished in an instant. "Be quiet. I'm all worked up now. Since early this morning, I've had to meet men I didn't want to meet and see people I didn't want to see, and now to make matters worse, people are calling me Mom—"

"I told you, I didn't call you that!"

"Mother!" Ayaka pushed her way past the thoroughly confused Kyousuke. She stood in front of Reiko, eyes sparkling. "Nice to meet you, good morning! I'm Kyousuke Kamiya's little sister, Ayaka Kamiya." Her pigtails bounced along with her cheerful greeting. "I'm much obliged to Renko! And I would definitely like to get along even better with her and treat her like a member of my own family, so…I'm not much good at anything, but on behalf of me and my brother, I look forward to working with you!"

"Nope."

"Whaaaa—?!" Ayaka looked astonished as her extended hand was bluntly brushed away. "B-but…why?!"

"Because I don't like Kyousuke."

"Huh—"

Ayaka froze.

"Sorry," Reiko said and shrugged her shoulders. "I think you're a charming, lovely little sister, but I hate your big brother, so…I don't want you to get along with Renko. A totally mediocre guy like him…and yet, what's this? He has two girls fawning over him! If he isn't an unbelievable philanderer?! There's no way that I would give my darling daughter to a guy like that. I plan to crush him, completely."

"

"Akabane…" Upon hearing Eiri's family name, Reiko clapped her hands. "Ahh…ha-ha! I see, so you're Rusty Nail!"

Eiri's eyebrows knit upon word of her assassin alias. "…You know about me?"

"Yep. Hijiri told me all about you. I've had an interest in your family for a long, long time, and I really wanted to meet you. Hmm, you're cuter than I thought! Let me see…"

Folding her arms, Reiko carefully looked the girl over. Her gaze crawled from the top of Eiri's head to the tips of her toes, not missing a single detail. "However, you're not quite there. Renko is a hundred times cuter!"

Her eyes went to Eiri's chest. "My daughter's boobs are bigger, after all. You're utterly outmatched, aren't yooooouuu?"

She grinned triumphantly.

Eiri was astonished. "…Huh? That's just your own personal opinion, isn't it? So what? It's fine for you to act like an overly doting parent, but it's irritating if you come on too strong, auntie."

"A-auntie—"

Reiko's face flushed. However, she quickly cleared her throat and pulled herself together. "No, no, no. I'm still in my twenties, so I'm not an auntie at all. And although I may be doting, it certainly isn't excessive, and it's definitely not irritating! As frustrating as it must be for you to lose to Renko, I'd like you to stop venting your anger on me. This is why children are…"

"Huh? Don't you think you're being much more childish, though? Going on about how you don't like Kyousuke, and you don't want to give your precious daughter to him, and how Renko's so much better… You're really immature, auntie."

"Don't call me auntie!" Reiko snapped. "You call me *big sister*. Big. Sis. Ter! You're a surprisingly rude girl, aren't you?! I don't care for you… You're neck and neck with Kyousuke. I don't like you at all!"

"That's so childish of you, auntie."

"I told you to call me *sister*!!" Reiko shrieked and pulled at her hair with both hands. Compared to Renko, who was unflappably easygoing, Reiko certainly was childish, despite looking very mature…

"…Someone with the appearance of an adult but the mind of a child?" Eiri gracefully brushed her hair back. "So generally you're—"

"Don't bully my mama, Eiri!! *Kksshh!*"

Renko jumped out from behind Renji and spread out her arms as if to protect her mother. Apparently, she had been hiding behind her brother the whole time.

"Waaaaaahhh, Renkooo!" Reiko sobbed.

"There, there. It's all right now, Mama. I'll give Tiny Tits here some punishment."

Stroking her progenitor's head, Renko looked up and glared at her classmate. The hostility was palpable, even through her gas mask. Renko growled menacingly. "…Next time you bad-mouth Mama, I'll kill you—get it? I won't forgive anyone who hurts her feelings!"

"Wha—?" Eiri faltered for a moment. "…Well then, what about Kyousuke?" she asked. "If this mother of yours ordered you to kill him, would you follow that order? Are you planning to listen obediently to what your mama has to say and murder him despite your unrequited love?"

"Kksshh?!" This time it was Renko's turn to falter. "Th-that's—" Her eyes darted around restlessly behind her viewports. "Th, th-th-th-th, that's beside the point, Eiri! Since Kyousuke and I will be forced to part if your class loses at the athletic festival, you're planning to sabotage us, aren't yooouuu?!" She pointed at her friend, conspicuously trying to change the subject.

"…Huh?" Eiri frowned and glared back at Renko. "There's no way I would do something like that. I'm not going out of my way to lose. I'm not really going to try to win, either, but…"

"Hmm, you don't have any motivation, eh? Get serious."

"…Huh? But I'm your enemy. Why are you trying to get me motivated… You don't want to win, after all? I mean, if your class wins, you and Kyousuke will be separated, so if you're planning to ease up—"

"I would never!!" Renko shouted, cutting Eiri off.

"—Renko?" her mother muttered, light flashing off the lenses of her glasses.

"I won't go easy on you! I'm going to take it seriously! I'll totally defeat yooouuu!"

"…Yes, yes," Eiri waved airily. "Do your very best."

"I'm serious, you hear?!" Renko shouted. "…I'm serious," she repeated, lowering her tone. "To me, Mama's words are absolute… If she tells me 'Don't go easy,' I won't, and if she tells me to give up, I'll give up, and if she tells me to kill, I'll kill! Even if that person is Kyousuke, I absolutely will." Rolling up the long sleeves of her jersey, she bared her jet-black tribal tattoos as if she were an animal baring her fangs.

And then Renko looked at Kyousuke for the first time. Her viewports were darkly tinted, obscuring her ice-blue eyes, but—"I want to know this more than anything, Kyousuke… Right now, right in this moment, how do you feel about me? How seriously are you going to try for my sake?! I believe in you… I'm counting on you to answer my feelings with whatever's in your heart." Her gaze bore into

Kyousuke, keenly conveying the intensity of her feelings.

The buoyant atmosphere had dissipated, and Kyousuke felt a strong pressure prickling on his skin. The sudden change made him uneasy.

“Renko…”

“So listen—” She slowly leaned closer. “At the athletic festival, let’s both try with all our might to defeat each other, okay?”

The gas mask did little to hide the bawdy bloodlust as Renko laughed.

X X X

Sixteen different games were featured at the athletic festival. There would be a Hundred-Meter Slaughter Footrace, an Unhinged Obstacle Course, a Slice-and-Dice Steel Thread Leap, a Group Ball-Toss Rave, an Explosion Tug-of-War, and many others. Normal games from athletic festivals and sports days had been transformed into extremely brutal contests.

However, the scariest part wasn’t the games, but—

“Okay, you bastards, know this! There are many casualties every year at the athletic festival, and most are the result of violence between participants. This is because the rules allow almost anything, as long as you don’t seriously injure or kill another student… If you only focus on the games, you’re sure to lose before you even know it.” Looking down on her students from the podium, Kurumiya delivered an ominous warning.

It was first period, on the fifth day of practice; first-year Class A was receiving a briefing.

Kurumiya’s speech was passionate and tense, just like the game practice. It allowed no room for Kyousuke and his classmates to relax, despite their growing fatigue.

“Among the other classes, the ones you should be especially careful of are the third-years. They’ve had two more years of rigorous manual labor than you new students. I expect that their stamina, physical strength, and combat abilities are all several levels higher than yours.”

“…Combat abilities? This is a place to reform murderers, but… combat abilities?”

“You there! You dare whisssperrrr?!”

The iron pipe, thrown in lieu of chalk, grazed Shinji’s cheek and destroyed the blackboard in the back of the classroom.

“Eee?! S-sorry!” Shinji trembled.

“—To be blunt, of all the past winners, more than eighty percent have been third-year classes. The remaining twenty percent have been second-years, and they too are formidable. Take a look at your student-directory handout.” Kurumiya picked up a sheet of A4-size paper.

The printouts, which had been distributed at the start of the lesson, listed the name, gender, age, number of people killed, threat level, and other assorted data for the students enrolled in Purgatorium Remedial Academy, ordered by class.

“Each class has about fifteen students, for a total of eighty-two. You can refer to the Red List for information on those whose threat levels rank A or above. They have more-detailed profiles there.”

Containing those further profiles was a red five-page document. Mug shots, information on their murders, aliases, radar graphs showing their abilities…these details and more were included, a testament to Kurumiya’s fervor toward the athletic festival.

In addition to height, weight, and sitting height, their chest-waist-hip measurements and body fat percentages were also listed. Privacy was apparently nonexistent at the academy. And yet, since Renko’s danger level was rated C+, her detailed profile was not included.

Shamaya’s physical data caught Kyousuke’s eyes—

…*Wait, who cares about that?!*

—But he forced his thoughts, which had flown off in a strange direction, back to the matter at hand. Instead of thinking about Renko, who had been remarkably scarce lately, or the measurements of certain other female students, he tried to focus on the document before him.

There were ten students on the Red List.

<**Murder Princess**> “Killing Mania” Saki Shamaya (Third-year Class A) Rank S

<**Savage Sukeban**> “Arch Enemy” Anji Gosou (Third-year Class A) Rank A

<**Honorable Enforcer**> “Under Oath” Takaya Kiriu (Third-year Class B) Rank A+

<**Ice Queen**> “Heartless” Mei Kuroki (Third-year Class B) Rank A+

<**Covetous Killer**> “Faceless” Amon Abashiri (Third-year Class B) Rank A+

<**Infamous Idol**> “Pretty Fucking Sick” Kurisu Arisugawa (Third-year Class B) Rank A+

<**Cruel Carver**> “Ripper Jack” Takamoto Yatsuzaki (Second-year Class A) Rank A

<**Cruel Carver**> “Ripper Jack” Motoharu Yatsuzaki (Second-year Class A) Rank A

<**Cruel Carver**> “Ripper Jack” Takakage Yatsuzaki (Second-year

Class A) Rank A

<**Costumed Killer**> "Beast of the Gale" Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka (Second-year Class B) Rank S

Every last one was an irredeemable psychopath.

One had cut up people into tiny pieces with a knife, another had gouged out someone's eyes and made the person eat them, another had drawn graffiti art on the street with blood and entrails, another had thrown a living victim into a sulfuric acid bath—just a quick look over the data regarding their bizarre crimes was enough to send a chill down his spine.

And these were the kind of opponents that Kyousuke and the others would soon be up against…

"Hey, look. This Arisugawa girl is super cute, yeah?! And so is Kuroki! I mean, she's high-ranking all around. She's an A in the looks department, too. No half measures!"

"Hee-hee-hee… They should make a student directory ranking all the girls' boobs from A to G… Hee-hee-hee-hee…"

"Wow, I'm suddenly feeling rather motivated! Personally, I feel like this Haruyo girl might be a dark horse. Judging from her name she seems half-Japanese, and her measurements are perfect. Unfortunately we can't see her face, but that worked out with Renko."

"Huh? Do NOT even tell me that you're still, like, into her, Shinji? If you take it to the next level and start fooling around with that bitch, I am seriously going to kill you."

"Tee-hee. If Miss Bitch is rank S, then big brother must be an S+, right? I don't think any of these upperclassmen are as strong as they look. They shouldn't be any trouble at all. My big brother will kill them all before any of us even have to get involved!"

"No, no…"

It seemed that the only two students feeling nervous were Kyousuke and—

"Ehhh?! We're g-g-g-g-g-gonna fight against…th-th-th-th-th-these people?! That's impossible—it's completely impossible! No matter how many lives we had, it wouldn't be enough!"

"…Fwah."

—Kyousuke and Maina. Eiri didn't even bother reading the Red List.

As the classroom burst into an uproar, Kurumiya shouted, "Quiet!" and silence instantly descended.

"Really… It's fine to be brave, but if you idiots take them lightly, it'll be a bloodbath. You've only got seventeen people. That places a lot of responsibility on each and every one of you. There have been instances in which some classes were totally annihilated before making it to the final game. Don't let your guard down, piggies!"

Together, the students gave a spirited answer.

""""Yes, ma'am!""""

Tightening up the lax atmosphere, Kurumiya continued, "That's better. Don't be negligent! I expect a lot out of you all. Especially Kamiya and Akabane, as they have the potential to compete with that group on the Red List. If this class fights together with those two as the linchpin, you might just stand a chance. Also—"

Kurumiya paused, staring intently at "a certain person." Everyone else's eyes naturally followed.

"U-um…what is it, Miss?" Maina asked, blinking her big eyes in confusion.

"Accidental Assassin, Black Pandora, Maina Igarashi, I have certain expectations for you as well! It would not be an exaggeration to say that the victory of first-year Class A depends on your efforts."

"Huh…?" Maina froze, looking momentarily petrified. And then—

"Huhhhhhhhh?! M-m-m-m-m-meeeeeeeeeeee?!"

She fell right out of her chair.

"Yeah," Kurumiya agreed and looked down at Maina, who had landed on her backside. "It's you, Igarashi. Your mind is dull and so are your reflexes, your physical abilities are below average, and your spirit is frail. You're shaken up by the slightest thing, and you repeat your mistakes many times over… Your impediments are your strong point, because you are going to *sabotage every other team*! If this goes well, that alone may gain us more ground than Kamiya and Akabane."

"Eh?! U-um—"

Ignoring Maina's flustering, Kurumiya went on. "That said, if it doesn't go well, we'll be the ones to take a serious blow, so we won't know how the chips fall until they do. Will we win thanks to you, or will we lose because of you? I'm hoping for the former. If by some chance it is the latter, when that happens—do you understand?"

"Eek?!" The color drained from Maina's face at both the intimidating tone and the solemn threat. "Ah, aaahhh…" Her eyes were open wide, and her teeth were chattering.

Maina was on edge even at the best of times, but with the heavy pressure of "the victory of first-year Class A" weighing on her, she seemed as if she might collapse at any moment.

Leaving Maina dumbfounded, Kurumiya returned to the podium. "…Well then. I suppose these three people are the key. Besides them, we have the clever Saotome, and Oonogi with his good reflexes. There's the agile and nimble Usami, and Tomonaga who knows no fear. And Miss Kamiya, who has no equal when it comes to malicious scheming… We'll have to build our tactics around these key people—"

"I am not malicious!"

“Now we’d better get on to choosing the participants for each game,” Kurumiya growled, ignoring Ayaka’s raised hand. It was time to get down to business. “Now, there are bound to be a lot of dropouts before the second half, so we’ll play that by ear. What’s essential is the first half. Let’s narrow the focus to the games we’ll concentrate on. Program number six, the Calamity Arms Race, and number eight—”

* * *

"Hyah-haaaaaa! I'm back, Kurumiya cutieeeeee!"

Just then, a lone male student kicked open the classroom's front door. Kurumiya froze as everyone's eyes gravitated to the entryway.

"……What the hell is that?" Kyousuke muttered.

His classmates also reacted in the same way.

Kurumiya alone remained composed as she handed the newcomer a printout. "Ah. So you've finally returned, Mohawk."

This person who had intruded on their classroom—the male student with leaves and branches stuck all over his body, his piercing-covered face filthy with mud—Kurumiya called him by name.

"……Mo…hawk?"

As the class stared fixedly at him, it gradually became clear that this was indeed Mohawk. His trademark bright red Mohawk hairstyle was dyed moss green to match his camouflage jumpsuit. What on earth had this problem child been up to…?

"…And?" Kurumiya asked, ignoring the bewildered students. "I suppose you've done what you were sent to do?"

"Heh-heh-heh! Of course I have, my honey. Here's the loot you asked for!"

Mohawk crawled forward toward her and handed Kurumiya a memo notebook. Its front cover was the same camouflage color as his clothing, with big red letters reading SECRET.

"Oh? Well, if you didn't just get it done! Let's see now—" Flipping through the notebook and confirming its contents, Kurumiya raised one eyebrow. "Well done."

"Hyah-haaaaaaaaaaaa!" Mohawk howled with delight at Kurumiya, who was flashing her canines. Seizing the opportunity, he edged even closer and looked up at his teacher with wistful eyes. "Hey, hey, Kurumiya baaaaaaby. I worked hard, right?"

"Yes, indeed." Kurumiya nodded and put her right hand behind her back.

"I carried out my top-secret mission, right?"

"Yep." Kurumiya nodded and gripped her special weapon, which was concealed in the back of her suit.

"Which means I can get a reward, right?!"

"I don't think so!" Kurumiya lashed out with the deadly iron pipe, smashing Mohawk on the side of the head.

"Abwuaa?!" Mohawk went flying.

Tapping the iron pipe on her shoulder, Kurumiya stepped on

Mohawk's head as he lay bleeding on the floor and glared down at him. "Whaddya mean by *reward*, huh? I thought I told you, Mohawk… When my class takes the top spot at the athletic festival, then I'll give you an extraordinary reward, I said. Has that goal been achieved? Not yet? Hmm?!

"If you have time to make requests, then I'll put you to work, maggot!" Kurumiya barked, swinging the pipe in both hands like a golf club. "Launch a kamikaze attack against an enemy class and stir up trouble there until you pass out or, if I'm lucky, until you dieeeeee!"

"Aye, aye, siiiiiirrrrrrrrrrr!!"

Mohawk, who had been struck on the cheek by Kurumiya's golf swing, was sent flying again, disappearing out the open door. From the hallway there came the sound of something smashing.

"Go away!" Kurumiya shouted. After closing the door, she returned to the lectern. She turned to face Kyousuke and the others, who sat astonished and confused as to why she was so angry. "… Hmph. You'd think he was completely useless, but somehow, contrary to all expectations, he's surprisingly helpful! Heh-heh-heh… Hey, you bastards, good news. *I've got my hands on some information.*"

"—Information?"

"Mm. I sent off that garbage idiot—sure that no one would mind if he died—and had him investigate each class's command structure, tactics, and practice schedule, among other things. The one who controls the information controls the battle—based on this data, we will be able to construct the ideal strategy."

""""…………""""

Kurumiya's eyes were formidable. She was serious about securing a victory.

Apparently, one of the older classes was holding training camp at the House of Limbo, and Mohawk had even headed out to that distant location. That was probably why they hadn't seen much of him lately.

Mohawk always runs riot, doing whatever he pleases… I wonder if the reason he's being so unusually obedient has something to do with that "reward" that's being dangled in front of him…

"The reward I'm going to give to Mohawk? Death, of course. Heh-heh-heh… I'll make good use of him, then finish him off myself in the end."

""""

X X X

"All right, we've got three days left until the big event! I wonder who from our class will fall in battle… It's half-exciting and half-scary!"

It was after school on the eleventh day of training. Shinji, sitting on top of the lectern, had suddenly delivered this ill-omened statement.

Fiddling with her nails at her desk, Eiri snorted. "…Hmph. It's already set, of course. No one's going to die. Are you stupid?"

"Heh-heh. That would be good, wouldn't it? Although personally, I'd like you to die, Eiri. Or else Ayaka or Maina, I'd even give Tomomi a warm welcome! Because *I'd get to make good use of you all*. Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

"…I take back what I said. You should be the one to die, creepo-philiac."

"We probably ought to kill him ourselves, right? We'd lose a little of our fighting strength, but he's so gross, I think it would be worth it. Weapon, weapon, where's a weapon when you need one—?"

"Oh dear! You can't, Ayaka! Please don't search for a deadly weapon like it's a pair of misplaced glasses!"

"Hold up… Why am I last again?! I literally cannot even believe that shit! And after I accepted you despite your freaky fetish… Shinji, you're cruel…like, really sick… I'll cut my wrists…" Tomomi slumped over Eiri's desk as well, sawing back and forth across her wrist with a ruler.

"…Huh? What do you think you're doing? That's not even yours."

Her bad joke had been shut down, but Tomomi just laughed and slapped Eiri's back. "Kyah-ha-ha! Thanks for the sick comeback, Eiri hun."

Eiri just frowned.

It had been ten days since practice for the athletic festival had started, and Kyousuke and the others had begun mingling more with their classmates. They had gradually opened up even to Shinji's group—a group that had been hostile since the beginning of school—and vice versa.

If you could somehow manage to ignore that they were all murderers, they were a surprisingly easy group to get along with, and during break times they chatted with Kyousuke's group and carried on amicably.

It was weird, but it seemed as if the two groups had held on to their animosity toward each another for so long only because they had made it a point to avoid any contact. Actually, each group had secretly wondered what the other was like.

Of course, it doesn't change the fact that they're all just fine with killing people, so I don't really feel the need to get any closer to them than I absolutely have to…

Kyousuke kept that thought to himself during their sessions of friendly banter.

"But here's the thing," Shinji mumbled, looking over the handout that Kurumiya had distributed. "As far as we can tell from reading the student catalog, nobody has really killed all that many people, right? Shamaya has by far the greatest number of murders, but aside from her the most anyone's killed is eight people. Next is seven, and after that six… There aren't that many who have killed more than three people. Most have killed just one or two."

He broke into a faint but fearless smile. "If you just look at the number of kills, the situation isn't as dire as we thought, right? Plus the upperclassmen who killed eight people did it together in a group of three. Kamiya, who killed twelve people, is second in the school, and Eiri, who killed six people, is practically fifth in the school!"

"Ohhh. That means we're the favorites anyway? We're totally good, first-year Class A!"

"No, no…"

They hadn't revealed it to Shinji and his group, but both Kyousuke and Eiri had a kill count of zero, and they didn't want anyone to depend on them. To start with…

"Numbers don't necessarily equal strength, right?" Eiri interjected coldly. "Kurumiya said, 'If you underestimate them, you'll die.' The upperclassmen are way more capable than we are, so if we start to let our guard down like that, I think we'll have a bit of a problem."

"""………"""

Shinji went quiet.

Eiri stopped fiddling with her nails and frowned. "…What?"

Shinji and Tomomi looked at each other.

"W-well…how should I put this, um…"

"…It's…kinda freaky? Definitely not like you, Eiri—"

"Hey, hey, did ya hear that, Usami?! Just now Eiri gave a totally normal opinion! *Prolly cuz she ranked lowest in our grade on the tests*. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"—Huh?"

Instantly, Eiri's demeanor changed. She stared daggers at Oonogi with her sharp, half-lidded, rust-red eyes. "What did you say? Try saying that one more time, Sunglasses…"

Oonogi, who had been scribbling on the blackboard with Usami—sketching a portrait of the group of girls without the slightest attempt to make the pictures at all accurate—began to visibly panic as Eiri slowly stood up.

"Ah?! No, um, it's just like you said, Eiri! I also think that the kill count's got nothin' to do with it, and that test scores don't always equal smartness, and huge boobs don't always equal stupid. Look, you've got tiny boobs, but you're still dumb, right? Ha-ha-ha…"

Eiri turned a bright, furious red. "Just die alreadyyy!"

Oonogi dropped his smug grin and screamed, tossing away the chalk as he fled out the classroom door.

"Huh?! Wait—" Eiri was about to chase after him, when—

"Fgyah?!" Leaping out into the hallway, Oonogi slammed into something solid. He was sent sprawling.

"Ah, shit…owww?! Look where you're walking, you—" Oonogi started to shout but looked up and stopped. "Ah, uh…u-ummm…" At a loss for words, he scooted out of sight behind the classroom wall, still on his backside.

Looming there was—

A male student wearing an ivory-white gas mask.

"………"

Dressed in a blue T-shirt reading GMK48 and tracksuit pants, Renji looked down apathetically at the scene before him. His right arm, which had been mangled by Kurumiya so badly that the bones had been exposed not even two weeks earlier, was now completely healed, without so much as a scar.

"W-watch where yer going!" Oonogi threatened while Renji simply stood, unmoving. "Does this guy not know to look ahead when he walks?! H-hey…whaddya…whaddya have to say for yourself? I'll kill ya!"

"………"

Renji offered no response. He just wordlessly took one step forward—

"Eee?! Just wait…wait! It was a lie, a lie, a lie! L-l-l-l-let's talk this out… L-let's talk… So, so-so-sorry, I'm sorryyyyyy!" Oonogi's voice cracked into a falsetto as he hastily apologized.

Unconcerned with Oonogi, Renji continued walking away down the hallway. Finally, when Renji had passed by their classroom and was fairly far away…Oonogi, unable to stand for fear and surprise, crawled back into the room.

"…Welcome back. What are you so scared of?" Eiri asked in an exasperated tone. "You're a mess."

"B, b-b-b-b, but…!" Oonogi was on the verge of tears. His sunglasses had slipped out of place, and he carried on without even stopping to fix them. "That guy, he was unbelievably hard!! It's terrifying! I thought he was made outta concrete or something. Plus, that air of intimidation… I thought he was gonna strangle me!! He's really something else, that gas mask guy… Now I know what it feels like to be an ant trampled underfoot by a mammoth!"

"Well, that's an exaggeration." Looking down at Oonogi from the lectern, Shinji waved his hand dismissively. "His body certainly is big, and since he's an exchange student, he does not appear on Kurumiya's list, which makes me uneasy. However, remember this, Arata. We in first-year Class A have the behemoth known as Kyousuke Kamiya on our side! If we make use of Kamiya's superior power, it'll be an easy victory, an easy victory, I say!"

"No, no. I'm telling you, I'm not—"

If I go up against him, I'll get myself killed without laying a single finger or even toe on him. Of course, Kyousuke couldn't say that.

It was true that Kurumiya had only given them the warning to "be careful" about Renji and had not revealed any detailed information. It was the same as she had done regarding Renko. With her limiter safety device removed, Renko certainly warranted a threat level of S+ or higher, and Renji's physical abilities were more than a match for hers.

Though, I don't think he'll take off the gas mask as long as he's not in any great predicament… But after all, she said, "Let's smash them up the best we can." It seems like the mother is intent on destroying us completely. We had better be careful, or our deaths will be quick.

"That's right, that's right, an easy victory!" Ayaka clung to Kyousuke's somber self. She looked around the classroom boastfully. "Because my big brother has completely destroyed a group of more than thirty bikers all by himself before! If it's a one-on-one fight, he won't lose to anyone!"

"H-hey—"

"Come on! You're everyone's leader, big brother, so you have to be imposing! If you're in a mood to lose, then we'll all lose at the athletic festival! We might be killed… Don't you think?"

Kyousuke was taken aback as his sister secretly whispered into his ear. No matter what the truth was, his classmates were relying on Kyousuke the Warehouse Butcher. And in that case, he would have to meet their expectations.

Even if he was bluffing, he would have to pull the class along. If he didn't, they wouldn't be able to fight to the bitter end of the athletic festival. They wouldn't be able to make it through without killing anyone or getting themselves killed.

It was probably a dream within a dream to graduate from this institution peacefully and uneventfully. That was why—

"…Ah, you're right. It's just like you said, Ayaka. That gas mask guy is nothing but a big hunk of meat. I'll put him down in an instant!

He’s a small fry, a small fry! And all the others are the same. Whether they’re mass murderers or spree killers or serial killers…I’ll knock ’em all out at once, so don’t worry, you guuuuuuyyyyyys!” Anxiety, hesitation, fear, conflict… As if he was throwing them off, Kyousuke howled.

The classroom fell silent for a moment before erupting into tremendous excited cheering.

““““Oooooooohhhhhh!””””

“That’s our Kamiya!” shouted Shinji in admiration.

“Kyousuke is so totally amazing!” whooped Tomomi cheerfully.

Oonogi and Usami clapped their hands, and Ayaka gave him a thumbs-up.

“How cool!” Maina’s eyes were sparkling.

“…Hmm?” Eiri raised an eyebrow.

““““Ka-mi-ya! Ka-mi-ya!””””

His classmates broke into an uproar.

And—

“…………Kksshh.”

In the back of the classroom, on the side where the door had been left open, stood Renji, entirely still, staring at Kyousuke.

Scary Killers Scaring Killers

SCREAM OUT FESTIVAL

THIRD EVENT

Rank **A**

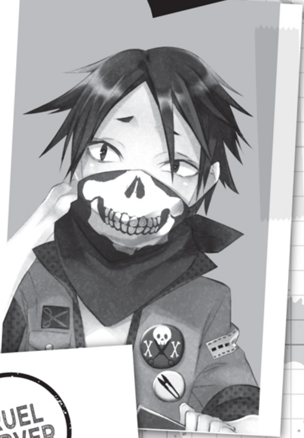
SURVEILLANCE TARGET 4

TAKAMOTO YATSUZAKI

CRUEL CARVER

Class : SECOND-YEAR CLASS A | **Nickname :** RIPPER JACK

The oldest of three serial killer brothers responsible for the murders of eight men and women under the collective name of the Ripper Jacks. Uses clever swarm tactics, believing that "when the three of us work together, we can commit the crime in half the time."



Rank **A**

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 5

MOTOHARU YATSUZAKI

CRUEL CARVER

Class : SECOND-YEAR CLASS A | **Nickname :** RIPPER JACK

The second brother. Excels in handling the same type of knives as his brothers. When the three of them cooperate, they are capable of dissecting an adult human in under a minute. His favorite foods are döner kebabs, churrasco, and sashimi made from live fish.

ARGET 6

A

TAKAKAGE YATSUZAKI

CRUEL CARVER

Class : SECOND-YEAR CLASS A | **Nickname :** RIPPER JACK

The third brother. Always wears a skull scarf so as to make clear his intentions to "cleanly separate flesh from bone." While the three brothers' abilities are individually formidable, the true threat lies in their cooperation.

Scary Killers Scaring Killers

SCREAM OUT FESTIVAL

THIRD EVENT

Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival

- MORNING

1. Entry Procession / Opening Ceremony
2. Purgatory-Style Warm-Up Exercises
3. Hundred-Meter Slaughter Footrace
4. Slice-and-Dice Steel Thread Leap
5. Guillotine Escape Game
6. Calamity Arms Race
7. Poison Bread Russian Roulette
8. Seek-and-Destroy Challenge
9. Very Large (One Ton) Ball Rolling
10. Apocalyptic Cavalry Battle

- AFTERNOON

11. Unhinged Obstacle Course
12. Explosion Tug-of-War
13. 'Til Death Do Us Part
14. Group Ball-Toss Rave
15. Thousand-Meter Slaughter Footrace
16. Captivating Teacher Costume Contest
17. Eight-Hundred-Meter Pandemonium Relay
18. All-Out Knock-Down Brawl ~A Final Showdown~*
19. Closing Ceremony / Moment of Silence

*A contest between the two classes with the most points, with the winners declared the ultimate victors.

Beneath a cloudless blue sky, the air exploded with chaotic hardcore music. When the discordant riffs and tumultuous drumming eventually subsided, a shrill shout rang out over the grounds.

"YEEEEEEEEEEAH! Don't sit there in silence, you crazy guys and bitchezzz! It's the once-a-year festival when you, frustrated from being cooped up in a filthy box, can finally get your psycho fix! I'm raising the curtain on the Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival, suckaaaaaaaaaaaaas!"

From a tent housing a makeshift DJ booth, a girl with hair dyed in brightly colored streaks shouted into the microphone; her voice was high-pitched, ignoring the screeching feedback blasting from the speakers.

"Are you waiting with your crotches spread wide, virgins? Are you ready and raring to go, cherries? This year, as always, I expect you kinky people will have an extreme, exciting, excessive death match, motherfuckers! Shit on caution! Fuck morals! Slay to your hearts' content, killers! …And, providing live coverage will be Pretty Fucking Sick, the most popular girl in school, yours truly, Kurisu Arisugawa—"

"—and back from temporary retirement (that was absolutely not a cover for anything suspicious) it's Venom Opera, the most hated person at school, stuck keeping her in check—it's me, Kirito Busujima." Seated beside the high-energy student, Busujima flatly finished the introduction.

Kurisu put one leg up on the desk and flashed a satanic hand sign.

"FUUUUUUUUUUCK! That's the MC pair we've got lined up for you, bastard pigs! Don't go dyin' in the middle of things!! Ride with us all the way to the finale! First up is the entry procession. Go ahead and show your scorn and disdain for the reckless blockheads, the ninety-nine people participating in this playful festival! Now, heeeeeere weeeee goooooooooo!"

—Immediately, another burst of music exploded over the grounds. This time it was outrageous death metal. Across from the MC tent, the students, who had been waiting on standby, entered the grounds, passing through an ominous admission gate decorated to look like the gates of hell.

In the lead was a group wearing long white jackets with the word KILL written on the backs in red. They moved down the track in perfect sync, led by a girl who resembled a high-quality porcelain doll. She wore a white headband over long, honey-colored hair and held aloft a matching white class banner, boldly heading up the procession.

"Weeeeeell now, well now, well now! First to enter is Class A of the third-year division, with a class color of despairing white! With the beautiful Public Morals Committee chair known as Killing Mania Saki Shamaya as their front lady, Arch Enemy Anji Gosou, and the principal members of the Murder Princess Fan Club belonging to this class, they're an undeniable favorite to win! Their homeroom teacher is the kindest and most feared teacher in the school, Outrange Outrage, Miss Mihiro Mizuchi! Their team slogan for the athletic festival is 'We shall take the championship. You have our sympathies, all of you lost causes!' composed by Saki Shamaya! Her prissy manners sure are irritating, but you've gotta put some stock in the words of the princess who has killed twenty-one people, right? …You know, I've nearly been killed quite a few times myself!"

"Right you are. Both in name and substance, she is the foremost killer at this institution."

The next group to appear wore stab-proof vests over jet-black uniforms, along with thick gloves and combat boots. They were fully equipped like special forces troopers and goose-stepped in unison, led by a slit-eyed male student.

"Also, also, this group is another top contender! Black from head to toe, it's the combat group of third-year Class B! Their class color is septic black! They've got the Public Morals Committee vice-chair Takaya 'Under Oath' Kiriu, and Heartless Mei Kuroki. Along with Faceless Amon Abashiri and many others, they're really a formidable class! Their homeroom teacher is the mysterious old man Mr. Greyman, the Moon Maniac! Their team slogan for the athletic festival is 'Although this may be a festival, we must still show restraint. Let us kill with moderation,' by Takaya Kiriu! Hooo, that's just like the (self-styled) conscience of the academy! …Now, I, Kurisu Arisugawa, am also a member of third-year Class B, but I will not be participating in the festival so that I can provide live coverage of the events. A narrow escape from death that was, you good-for-nothings!! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

"…… Yes, and next are the second-years."

Busujima continued the broadcast while Kurisu continued laughing maniacally.

A gaudy group wearing pink patches entered, followed by another group wearing purple *happi* coats over bleached cotton outfits, and began circling the grounds.

Holding the first group's pink class flag was a male student of medium build whose mouth was hidden by a skull scarf. His bangs were highlighted the same color as his clothes.

"Second-year Class A, their class color is entrail pink. Headed up by the infamous Ripper Jack brothers, this class is home to problem children, a place for sadistic and violently bizarre killers—"

"Home to problem children? That's kuh-razy! Compared to me, the queen of problem children, they're just little cuties, Mister. Compared to me, the theatrical serial killer nicknamed Nightmare Theater, who put on a violent production using the Japanese police, the media, and all the ordinary people as cast members—"

"We're not talking about you. Please do your job, Miss Arisugawa."

"Hyah?!" Kurisu withered at the sight of a venomous snake winding its way around her neck. *"S-sorry… O-on with the broadcast! Second-year Class A, their homeroom teacher is the narcissist cross-dresser —I mean, the beautiful, fashionable Kaleido Blade Dahlia Barazono! Their team slogan for the athletic festival is 'Victory or defeat doesn't matter. We're just here to enjoy the hunt,' by Takamoto Yatsuzaki! Well, I certainly can't argue with that—if you're not having fun, then what's the point?! He's got it spot on, this one."*

"*—But, however!*" Kurisu shouted, the venomous snake still coiled around her, "*going by their outfits, the ones set to enjoy the festival the most are probably these guys…second-year Class B!*"

The group she indicated, parading around in *happi* coats with Blood Festival written on the backs, certainly appeared festive. However, in place of the portable shrine typically carried in such processions, they carried on their shoulders—*a blood-red beast.*

Its short and stout body, about five feet long, was covered in hair, and its ears, which tapered from the top of its head, bounced around wildly. Its glassy, distant eyes and the tongue dangling between its fangs gave it an eerie appearance. It was—a *kigurumi* mascot costume.

The cartoonish creature was also wearing a *happi* coat and waved the purple class flag as it was carried along by its classmates. It was truly a surreal spectacle.

"Their class color is depression purple! The thing that they're carrying around like a portable shrine is, in fact, the person often hailed as the strongest second-year student, Beast of the Gale Haruyo Gevaudan Tanakaaa! …Hmm? You want to see inside the suit? Stop right there! Last year, another student caught a peek inside and ended up in a body bag for his trouble! And the homeroom teacher entrusted with such a dangerous person is the plump middle-aged man Mr. Shidou 'Break Fast' Muguruma! Just like their teacher, who is a master assassin, this class is especially skilled at armed combat! Their team slogan for the athletic festival is 'All those who oppose our military rule will be utterly defeated. Prepare

yourselves,' by Haruyo the Beast! It's kinda hard to read, because it's written all weird!"

"And despite appearances, she's more or less a girl."

"Yes, indeed, and there's even a rumor circulating that she's a beautiful girl—they say it might be true! But while we're all curious about Miss Haruyo's appearance, here come some new faces! They passed the psycho murder entrance exam and signed up for school here; they're (essentially) supernova psychopaths—it's the first-yeeeaaars! Welcoooooome! Welcome to heeeeeelll!"

Accompanied by Kurisu's ever more enthusiastic coverage and violent hardcore background music, Kyousuke and the others entered the festival grounds. Their arms and legs moved neatly in sync as they marched along the track. They were clad in white gym uniforms with red shorts, and the girls wore old fashioned bloomers.

Kurisu wrapped the venomous snake around her like a towel and continued shouting. *"The first ones I'll introduce are first-year Class A! Their class color is fresh-blood red! Their homeroom teacher's outward appearance belies her extreeeeeeme inner nature—it's Bellows Maria Hijiri Kurumiya! And the player to watch in Kurumiya's class, well-known for his savagery, is without a doubt…thaaat guuuyyy!"*

"……?!"

In a panic, Kyousuke and the others dodged the venomous snake that was suddenly soaring toward them. Fixing his grip on the bright red class banner, Kyousuke reflexively glared at the broadcasters' seats.

Kurisu feigned exaggerated terror. *"Hyeee?! Ooohhh, it seems I've got his attention now! I sent the snake flying and got an amaaazing scowl launched right back at me! That's just like the Warehouse Butcher… There were daggers in his eyes, no lies!*

"But aaanyyywaaaaaay, that guy's name is Kyousuke Kamiya. He's a real top-grade killer, a high-ranking mass murderer who took out twelve people! Can the upperclassmen hold down this monster, already distinguished from the other newcomers?! Or will he take them out all at once, just like his victiiimmms?! This group's team slogan for the athletic festival is 'I'll crush you all in one go, old-timers. It'll be an instant kill, an instant kill—die, you sack of garbage!' by Kyousuke Kamiya!"

"Huh?"

Hold up. No way do I remember writing something that provocative. Judging by the phrasing, it's gotta be Kurumiya's doing…

A cold sweat welled up on Kyousuke's back as the atmosphere on the grounds erupted into a frenzy.

"Hyeeeeee! What did you say, Kyousuke Kamiya?! Called Slayer, Megadeth, Metallica, Anthrax, and more, is the mad dog who had so many nicknames before entering school here still going strong?!" Kurisu taunted.

"Stirring up so much conflict right at the opening of the event, provoking the upperclassmen's desire to kiiilllllll!"

"My desire to kill is also on the rise, you know. What do you think you're doing to my dear friend…"

Ignoring Busujima, who glared at her with scornful eyes, Kurisu continued her coverage:

"However, that's not all we've got this year! In the remaining first-year Class B, there's another increeedible monster! Their class color is coldhearted blue! Their homeroom teacher is our own Mr. Kirito Busujima!"

"…Well, I was, anyway. After my, ah, 'incident,' a substitute was quickly called in from outside and is now acting as temporary homeroom teacher. I don't believe that the second-and third-year students know her yet, so allow me to give her a small introductio—"

"Nice to meet you, naughty children!"

Just then, a woman dressed in white grabbed the microphone and hijacked the broadcasting booth.

"I am Reiko Hikawa. Today I will be participating in the athletic festival as the homeroom teacher for first-year Class B! It's my first time, so be gentle, okay? Heh-heh… Oh, by the way, my boobs are a J cup."

"……?!"

Instantly, the students marching in tight formation fell into disarray (mainly the boys). Innumerable eyes turned to the broadcasting booth. First-year Class B, already well aware of that information, continued marching undisturbed. Wearing track pants and blue band T-shirts emblazoned with GMK48, they were led by a girl in a black gas mask and walked on in a well-organized fashion.

Busujima, who had gotten the mic back, informed the crowd that "*Classes aside from first-year Class B will receive a demerit.*"

Kurisu, who was staring fixedly at Reiko's chest, snapped back to her senses. *"Unnnnnnbelievable! Hey, hey, are you serious, ABCDEFGHIJ cup?! J-J-J cup?!"* Her voice rang with awe. *"What the hell?! This female teacher is packing unthinkable weapons of mass destruction. She's not equipped with nuclear bombs but nuclear boobs. It's a mammary maaaaaassacre! Incidentally, even I, a mere B cup, have been severely wounded…"*

Placing a hand on her flat chest, Kurisu gritted her teeth. However, she immediately shook her head back and forth and renewed her grip on the microphone.

"O-okay…back to the coverage! Led by this unimaginable GTO—Great Teacher Oppai*—first-year Class B has a boy and girl who wear gas masks around the clock, a girl with a flour sack on her head, a boy so covered in*

tattoos that his skin is green…and that's just the beginning. It's where all the weirdos are gathered, a real avant-garde party! Their team slogan for the athletic festival is 'Boobies!' by Renko Hikawa! …Huh? Just that? What the hell! Even a joke can go too far! What a bunch of boob promoters—Ooohhhhhh, what is that?! That gas mask girl's boobs are also huuuuuuge! Holy cow! Whaddya have to eat to grow those things?! Goddamn! Shit! Jesus! Panna cotta! Fuu—?!"

Slamming the mic down, Kurisu tore at her hair and madly smashed her face into the desk like she was headbanging along to an unheard tune.

Ignoring her, Busujima continued the coverage. *"Uh… And that makes six classes in total. Altogether there are ninety-nine people contending for the number of points necessary to secure overall victory. There will be violence and blood and tears. It'll be a hard-core show, with a cast of murderers. There are absolutely no morals or human rights here, folks! Everyone, get excited, and let's begin!"*

× × ×

They concluded the entry procession and moved on to the opening ceremony. Led by representative team members carrying their classes' banners, the students of each class formed two columns and stood in alignment. The explosive roar of metalcore music stopped, and the grounds were silent.

Amid the solemn atmosphere, a woman clad in a white jersey calmly ascended the morning-assembly platform. She was pretty, with loosely tied black hair and eyes like polished obsidian. She clasped her hands behind her back and looked over the students with a gentle gaze.

"*We now begin the Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival,*" Busujima announced. Kurisu was lying facedown in a pool of blood on the desk, having hit her head one too many times.

"Well then, first the chairman of the board…is, as always, shut away in solitude, so we will have a greeting from the homeroom teacher of third-year Class A, Miss Mihiro Mizuchi. Miss Mizuchi, if you please."

"Yes."

Nodding, the woman standing on the morning-assembly platform smiled. She surveyed the students with a disarming expression, looking as if she wouldn't harm a single fly.

"There."

—Blam, blam!

Faster than the eye could see, the woman—Mizuchi—pulled out a pair of pistols that had been hidden behind her back and fired twice.

"Gyah?!" Two shots rang out, and two students fell to the ground.

""""......?!""""

In the face of such astounding violence, the other students huddled together.

Mizuchi's expression did not change in the least. "Quiet now," she cautioned them in a gentle voice, gun barrels still raised to the sky. "Let's refrain from whispering, everyone. If you don't, I'll have to fire again."

"Ookubo, Kattaaa! Are you okay, hey?!" The fallen students were both in third-year Class B, and a classmate was checking on their status.

A girl in the same class yelled, "Miss Mizuchi?! It's unfair! Gunning down students in other classes and reducing their fighting strength is—"

—*Blam!* Mizuchi fired another shot, silencing the screaming girl with a bullet.

"Sayaaaaaa?!"

—*Blam!* With her left-hand pistol, she gunned down a male student who was about to protest the previous shooting.

Clutching a weapon in each hand, Mizuchi was no longer smiling. A vein on her forehead bulged angrily. "...Quiet, I said. I don't have bullets to waste on pigs who can't follow instructions. These aren't rubber bullets—they're live rounds, so is there anyone else who would like one?"

""""

The extremely unorthodox contents of the oath were hardly becoming of an academy founded for the reformation of juvenile murderers. Of course, the person leading the oath was the chair of the Public Morals Committee. Just like the Summer Death Camp earlier that year, there was no doubt that this was going to be the kind of event that would never take place in a normal rehabilitation facility.

Even the first-year students who, unlike Kyousuke and the others, did not know the true nature of the academy, were likely already starting to suspect something…

"—Continuing on, we'll have the school song."

While singing the school song, over 70 percent of which was sung in a death-metal growl, Kyousuke peeked at the person directly to his right—the upperclassman in the *kigurumi* mascot suit.

He had been told that the assassination curriculum would start next year, but now that Kyousuke found himself standing in the same space, face-to-face with the upperclassmen, it became abundantly clear how different the second-year and third-year students were. They had none of the hoodlum-like roughness of the first-year students, but rather a strange sense of calm hanging over them. Their killer instincts had been honed to a fine edge. It made them all the more terrifying.

"…………"

Standing to Kyousuke's left was the girl wearing the black gas mask.

People like Renko or Shamaya might try to hide their insanity and blend into their surroundings, but no matter how hard they pretended to be normal, they were always strange and frightening in the end—that is what Kyousuke was beginning to truly realize.

Seeing as how all the upperclassmen have been trained to be assassins…they've got to be a pretty evil bunch. That's exactly why I've got to pull everyone together.

Standing in the middle of the athletic grounds, devoid of spectators, Kyousuke tightly clenched his fists.

X X X

With the opening ceremony finished, and Purgatory-Style Warm-Up Exercises over, the students filed out of the grounds.

The competition would finally begin, starting with the first event on the program. There were sixteen contests in all, worth varying amounts of points depending on their difficulty.

First up was the Hundred-Meter Slaughter Footrace. It was a simple contest in which the selected runners from each class would circle the track halfway, competing for first place. Although the points awarded for each individual race were very low, five races would be run in total, which meant that, taken together, a valuable number of points were on the line.

It was the first match of the first event, a memorable occasion. The participants in the first race were—

Lane 1 Chihiro Andou (First-year Class B) Rank: C+
Lane 2 Ronaldo Gacey (Second-year Class A) Rank: B
Lane 3 Kotonoha Katsura (Third-year Class A) Rank: B+
Lane 4 Hiroshi Rekuta (Second-year Class B) Rank: B+
Lane 5 Mei Kuroki (Third-year Class B) Rank: A+
Lane 6 Shinji Saotome (First-year Class A)

"And it's already my turn, eh? Take a good look, everyone… I'll take a magnificent first place and show you all how to get off to a good start." Shinji, wearing a red headband, brushed his hair back and laughed boldly.

From the spectator seats, Tomomi yelled, "Kyah, Shinji! Do your beeest!" and waved the class flag.

Shinji raised his hand slightly in response to the cheering. "Hmm… Leave it to me. It might not be obvious by looking at me, but I'm a rather accomplished sportsman. My hundred-meter time is just over twelve seconds! You can be sure I won't lose to any ordinary opponent. But—"

Shinji looked toward the runner next to him in lane five. There, armored from head to toe in all-black protective gear, was a girl with braided hair. Expressionless, she stretched in silence.

Shinji suddenly grinned and held out his right hand toward her. "Nice to meet you, miss. I'm Shinji Saotome, first-year. Wow, you're awfully pretty, aren't you! I'll have to be careful not to let your feminine charms distract me from the race."

"……That's right," she answered curtly, ignoring Shinji's extended hand.

"Ah," Kyousuke muttered at the familiar-sounding tone, as he watched over the match from the spectator seats. "That upperclassman, she led us during the woodland exploration—"

"…Y-yeah." Maina nodded. "She's on the Public Morals Committee, right? I wonder if Shinji can really win…," she mumbled apprehensively.

At that time, she had called herself Morita, but apparently her actual family name was Kuroki. She was not wearing her silver-rimmed spectacles, which made her cold aura seem that much more frigid.

Beside her, a faintly smiling boy dressed as a clown with a bright red afro, and a girl who was staring vacantly into the air with deep-set eyes, had each taken their places.

"…*Sluurp*. Anything goes, so…it's okay if I eat them, right?"

Waiting impatiently in the first lane, Chihiro's bloodshot eyes were open wide, and she was drooling. She surveyed the other participants as if looking over her next meal.

Energetic and melodic death metal exploded out of the speakers.

"It's showtiiiiiime! Finally starting in our bloody colosseum, the first event of the athletic festival…it's the Slaughter Footraaaaaace! It's funny because the name is weird!"

"Sure. Well then, everyone, are you ready? Take your places—"

The six took their starting stances.

"Get seeeeeeeeet…"

—Bang!

"Bwah?!"

The instant the gunshot rang out, Shinji's body went flying through the air. The moment the race had begun, Kuroki had pulled out a baton and *smashed it into Shinji's side*.

Spinning around and spewing bloody vomit, Shinji plunged into the first-year Class A spectator seats.

"Kyaaaaaahhh?! Wha…? Shinji, are you okay?!"

"…Bon appétiiiiiit!"

While Tomomi was dropping the class flag and screaming, the next one to pick a fight was Chihiro. Her big mouth open, she leaped toward the buttocks of the clown, who had come out in front of her at the starting dash. However—

"Ronaldo magic. ♪"

"……?! Huh, huhhh?"

Chihiro realized that the clown's body was not where it had seemed as her jaws chomped fruitlessly in the air. It really was just like magic. The cannibal's eyes darted about as she began to panic.

Avoiding her surprise attack, the clown bounded toward Chihiro, hands clapping joyfully. "Luu. Luu. Laaa. ♪" With a cheer, he launched a violent counterattack, landing a dropkick on Chihiro's stomach.

"Gyahn?!"

Chihiro's small figure went tumbling over the ground, sent flying by the force of the blow. Her breathing was labored as she writhed in agony and spewed drool everywhere.

"Sorry! Whenever Ronaldo starts having fun, he ends up killing. ♪ "

Ahead of the laughing clown, Kuroki grabbed Shinji by the collar and pulled him back onto the track. "…That's out of bounds."

The clown, on the other hand, straddled Chihiro, pinning her down—

"Would ya look at thiiiiiis?! Third-year Class B's Mei Kuroki and second-year Class A's Ronaldo Gacey are ignoring the race and beating up on the first-yeeeears!"

The violence was entirely one-sided.

Kuroki held Shinji by the collar with her left hand, dispassionately striking his face with her baton. Ronaldo worked up a nice rhythm with his left and right punches, beating Chihiro's face to a pulp. One of them indifferent, her expression, even her eyes unchanging; the other, entranced, his voice playful: The two carried out a savage assault, showing no mercy.

"Violeeeeeeence! The incredible Heartless! Unable to feel empathy for others, Kuroki does not understand people's pain and suffering. She's a demonic bitch who can perform any act with a straight face. Even things that an ordinary person couldn't do for the pain in their heart, those feelings have no effect on Heartless! And the other one, the Cannibal Clown Ronaldo Gacey, the buffoon who tricked young children with his magical sleight of hand and killed them, then made hamburgers with one-hundred-percent human meat patties! That clown won't stop until he makes his opponent into mincemeeeaaat!"

"Noooooo, Shinji?! Shinjiiiiii!"

"Waaahhh, chika-chika-Chihirooooooo?!"

Screams welled up from the first-years' seats. Unable to contain herself, Tomomi tried to run over to the track, but Kurumiya pinned her arms behind her back and held her in place.

"Calm down. I told you, didn't I? The athletic festival is a beatdown. If you go out there now, you'll just get yourself killed, too… There are plenty of groups that don't care about winning in the events worth fewer points, and just beat up on their opponents! That's why I told you not to be careless, but…those idiots!" Glaring at the field, Kurumiya ground her teeth in frustration.

At first Shinji and Chihiro had fought back desperately, but their strength was exhausted in the face of the relentless violence, and finally they had collapsed.

The remaining two competitors left the four behind and had long since passed the goal line.

"…Why don't we leave it at that." Finally taking her hands off the unconscious Shinji, Kuroki stilled her baton. Surveying her surroundings with dull eyes, she stepped toward Ronaldo, who was even now continuing to swing his fists.

"Luu. Luu. Laaa. ♪ Luu. Luu—"

"Stop it."

"Laaaaaa?!"

She kicked him in his bright red afro.

Staring down at Ronaldo where he lay on the ground, Kuroki held him down with a combat boot. "As a member of the Public Morals Committee, I cannot overlook any further acts of violence. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and violence for violence…which is to say, I will also destroy your face."

"Kyyyeeeaaaiiiiii?!"

—*Crunch.*

Her heavy boot crashed down, crushing Ronaldo's face. After stomping him to a pulp several more times, Kuroki walked leisurely toward the goal.

Shinji, Chihiro, and Ronaldo twitched pathetically, unable to rise. The medical team rushed over with stretchers and carried them away, heave-ho.

"Bam-bam-baaaaaam! And that's the maaaaaatch! Third-year Class A's Kotonoha Katsura, second-year Class B's Hiroshi Rekuta, and third-year Class B's Mei Kuroki finish, in that order! The remaining three were all retired! From the very beginning the upperclassmen are giving the underclassmen a bitter baptism! As expected, the upperclassmen are very strong! Can you rally yourselves, underclassmen?! We hope that you will for the following races!"

× × ×

In the second and third races that followed, the first-years also suffered crushing defeats. The upperclassmen rushed to attack the new students, who were still reeling in shock after the first race. First-year Class A lost two male students to the bloodbath, and first-year Class B had one boy and one girl torn to tatters. And then—

"……Fwah."

The fourth race. The runner from first-year Class A was a beautiful, yawning girl. Eiri, her red headband tied on like a ribbon, stood at the starting line, looking as if she didn't feel the least bit of enthusiasm.

At her feet—

"Ah-ha! Wh-what exquisite bare legs these are…pale and smooth, with a delicate balance of muscle and fat, the lively beauty of slender feminine legs! They're not only soft but look really flexible as well. Why, just looking at them makes me want to reach out and… Ah-ha-ha, and bloomers, too, atop Miss Akabane's legs—could it be that Miss Kurumiya is trying to kill me with desire?! Aah, I can't stop drooling… *slurp, slurp*, ha-ha…hnnnggghhh."

Shamaya from lane five had wandered over to the first lane and was crouching low, eyes locked point-blank on the pale expanse of Eiri's bare legs. Her slack facial expression was completely inappropriate for a young lady.

Eiri was pretending not to notice the attention, but her face had stiffened slightly. Even the students waiting in the other lanes looked a little uncomfortable.

However—

"Pardon meeeeeeeeeeee!"

As soon as the race began, Shamaya displayed her peerless strength, dispatching the competitors on both sides—from second-year Class A and third-year Class B—with powerful backhand blows.

"Gyah?!"

"Gwaah?!"

Indifferent to the sprawling, bleeding pair, Shamaya kicked off into a run. Next she set her aim on a female student in a *happi* coat. The demonic hand of the Murder Princess stretched out behind the girl, who was chasing a male student in a blue T-shirt.

"You're out of your depth. Move aside!"

"—Huh? Kyaaaaaahhh?!"

Shamaya grabbed the girl by the nape of the neck, then pulled her back and threw her down with all her strength.

The boy ahead of her turned to look, and his eye—the one that was not covered with an eye patch—opened wide. "Kuh… You mustn't. Control yourself, Azrael! Ragnarok has only just begun—here, in this place, you mustn't release your power, Skylit Drive—"

Ignoring Kuuga Makyouin (real name: Michirou Suzuki) as he crouched, clutching his left arm and rambling nonsense, Shamaya dashed onward, her bloodshot eyes blazing.

"Wait, Miss Akabaneeeeee! Wait, I saaaaaayyy! You simply must allow me to savor your lustrous leeeeeegs! If I catch you, first I'll lick you all over and get you sticky with spit and then move on to the secret garden hidden by your bloomers! I'll…ha-ha. I'll XX, and XXX, and XXX, and get messy when I XX while everyone watches—"

"Nn…noooooooooooo!!"

Shamaya furiously chased after Eiri, who had leaped out in front at the starting dash. Fearing for her personal integrity, Eiri picked up the pace as tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

Even so, she couldn't shake Shamaya. The distance between them quickly narrowed, and an outstretched hand grasped at Eiri's bloomers—

"GOOOOOOOOOOAL! Reaching the finish line first, against all

expectations, it's first-year Eiri Akabane of Class A! Holding back third-year Class A's Saki Shamaya, she's first to the goooaaal! An unbelievable rookie has entered the scene…seducing the goddess of victory with beautiful legs that drove Killing Mania mad, securing an unexpected victoryyy?! And also, first-year Class B has shrewdly made it to the finish!"

"Ha-ha, I got yooouuu! Oh-ho-ho…"

"Eeeeeekkk?! Let me go, you perverted princeeeeeess!"

"He-he-heh… Now the true hell is upon us! Go ahead and enjoy your temporary respite, as best you can…!"

As Shamaya and Eiri struggled with each other on the ground, Michirou shuffled past them and the goal, mumbling to himself.

Busujima scratched the back of his head at this strange state of affairs. *"Ummm… Can we, ah… Can someone please stop Miss Shamaya?"*

× × ×

"Right. Now that Miss Mizuchi has put an end to a certain Public Morals Committee member's rather obscene transgressions…"

"We're moving on to the fifth race! And it's the last contest in the Hundred-Meter Slaughter Footrace. It's all been building up to this, and bringing the action to a close are these six students! First, in lane one—"

"Hyah-haaaaaaaaa! It's the one you've been waiting for, asshoooles!! Finally the main character enters the stage! I'm gonna slaughter each and every one of you side characters, so get ready!! Kyah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! By the way, my name is—"

"*FUUUUUUUUUCK!*" Kurisu shouted, hanging out of the MC booth, middle fingers angrily raised. *"Don't interrupt the live coverage—! I'll slaughter you first, you Mohawk bastard!! I see, so this is the troublemaker everyone's been talking about… You think you got what it takes to shake me from my position as the ultimate problem child, huh?!"*

"*Please don't engage in such improper contests,*" Busujima interjected.

"…Contest? Hya-ha-ha! You can't compare me to anyone! Pitiful rivals like you are out of your depth!! No contest!"

The male student in lane six, strutting and shouting just as he pleased, was, of course, Mohawk. Provoking Kurisu, as well as the rest of his upperclassmen competition, he didn't seem to give a single thought to his explosive situation.

In lane one, a female student stood looking completely unfazed. She glanced sidelong at Mohawk and the three other upperclassmen who were giving off menacing vibes…

“Laughable. It’s best to pay no mind to the posturing of such a weakling. If you allow yourself to be taken in by cheap provocation, you only show yourself to be a fool on the same level!”

Beast of the Gale Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka: Dressed in a blood-red *kigurumi* mascot suit, she was the mysterious Costume Killer. Considered the strongest of the second-year students, she was supposed to be the best fighter in the whole academy. Kurumiya had called special attention to her, warning the class to be especially vigilant around this particular mass murderer. Haruyo had killed seven people outside of the academy and one person after enrolling. Kurumiya’s briefing had ranked her threat level S, the same as Shamaya.

Also—

“…………”

Looming massively in lane two was Renji Hikawa. Atop his tall muscular body was an ivory-white gas mask, making him as mysterious as Haruyo.

Under the bulky *kigurumi* costume, Haruyo let out a sound of wonder. “Whoa! You’re no ordinary freshie. I can feel a torrent of unusual energy around you.”

“…………”

Renji was silent. He did not even look in Haruyo’s direction.

“Oh-ho-ho, I see… So you make it a point not to engage in superfluous talk before a battle? Interesting. I like you, Mr. Mask. It seems like this will be at least somewhat enjoyable. Don’t break on me too easily!”

Renji seemed to ignore her.

Haruyo laughed a strange, angry laugh. Like Mohawk and the others, she was, in her own way, working herself up for battle.

Heavy bass music reverberated through the grounds.

“Okaaay! Well then, let’s get started already. Oy, Mohawk, get in position! You too, second-and third-years. Silence that damn impertinent underclassman with all your might!! Engrave terror into his very core, so that he never shoots his mouth off again!”

The race started. Immediately—

—A blood-colored breeze blew past.

Before the sound of the starting bell had faded, Haruyo had made a beeline from lane one to lane six. All the students along her route froze in surprise. She must have swung her fluffy arms faster than the eye could see, but there was no obvious effect.

“……Hya-ha? Hya, hya-ha-ha-ha… Hyaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Mohawk laughed and smacked his chest. He ambled toward Haruyo, who was standing still a few steps away, and put his hands on her shoulders. “What’s with you? You startled me. Gya-ha-ha! After all that, it was all for show, just like your *kigurumi*—”

“Don’t worry about that. *You are already done for*.”

“—Hyah-ha?”

The moment Haruyo finished speaking, a thin line of blood began to trickle from Mohawk’s nose. Quickly the flow increased, and soon red rivers of blood were rushing from his nose and then his eyes, his mouth, his ears, and…other holes.

“Eeeeee?! Wh-what the hell is thiiiiiisss?!”

“The blood, the blood won’t stop—gyeeeeeehhh?!”

“H-h-h-h-help meeeeee!!”

Mohawk was not the only one in distress.

The second-and third-year students who had been positioned along Haruyo’s path also had blood gushing from every hole in their bodies. The torrents only grew faster and seemed to be far from stopping.

“Abwuh?!” “Hybwuh?!” “Twabah?!” “Hya-haaaaaa?!”

Simultaneously, they all let out showers of blood and agonized death cries and then collapsed.

“………Huh?”

No one knew what had happened.

“Hwaaaaaah?!” Kurisu’s hysterical voice rang out across the grounds, which were in an uproar. *“Wh-what the hell just happened?! I’ve only ever seen stunts like that in manga or anime!! What on earth did the Beast just do?!”*

“*My goodness, wasn’t that the Assassin’s Fist?*” Busujima offered.

“—Assassin’s Fist?”

“Yes. A type of martial arts cultivated by Master Rokusha. It’s characterized by attacking the inside of the body rather than the outside. Victims of the assault show the symptoms a little late, as we’ve just seen. The attack disrupts the target’s vital energy and destroys their internal organs, resulting in sudden death… She must have learned the technique from Master Rokusha, her homeroom teacher. To master such a powerful skill in only half a year…what a frightening young lady! Perhaps that fluffy costume softens the external blows, like boxing gloves, while amplifying the power of the internal assault…”

“Indeed.” Haruyo nodded and laughed boldly. “Oh-ho-ho! The martial art I wield is handed down directly from the master. And even though I’m still in training, an average human cannot hope to withstand it. With this, I will completely exterminate—”

“...........”

“But it looks like it didn’t take?”

Among the students submerged in a sea of blood, one person still stood there calmly. It was the giant wearing an ivory-white gas mask —Renji.

Renji should also have taken the hit from Haruyo’s Assassin’s Fist, but no matter how much time passed, he showed no signs of injury and did not bleed a single drop. He stood tall and still as a statue, looking just the same as before the bell rang.

“Fa-ha-ha! You withstood my attack and yet still stand. Interesting, interesting, first-year! To think I would encounter a powerful person like this, other than Kyousuke.”

“Geh?! Am I marked by people like that, too…?” Kyousuke muttered.

…I’ve probably been targeted without even knowing it.

Maybe there was someone among the upperclassmen who had a special interest in Kyousuke and the other new students and had been visiting the old school building in secret even before the athletic festival…

As Kyousuke looked on, feeling dejected, Haruyo approached Renji, carefully watching for any sign or tell. “Well then, if you’ll allow me, I’ll also go full-out. I’m not going easy, and I’ll probably take your life, but try not to hate me? Watch closely!”

Stomping on the ground, Haruyo instantly rocketed her short and stout body toward him.

"Hundred Strike Slaughter Fist!"

She began to hit Renji's body at ultra-high speed with both fluffy arms, too fast to follow.

"Aa-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha—achaaa!"

It was impossible to count how many times she had hit him when, several seconds later, she landed a final right-hand blow on the left side of Renji's chest, finishing her lightning-fast assault.

"*Hohhh,*" Haruyo exhaled pointedly.

"…………"

As expected, Renji did not move. The atmosphere was tense. Everyone on the grounds gasped as ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds passed…

"H-huh? That's odd. The effects should be obvious by now…but…?"

"…………"

About a minute had passed like this. Haruyo relaxed and let out a perplexed squeak. Looking up at Renji's gas mask, she poked at his body through his shirt. "Hmmm. I wonder if I made a mistake? I think I'll try hitting you again… H-hundred Strike Slaughter Fist!"

"Aa-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha—"

Renji looked down at Haruyo furiously swinging her fists and drew back his right leg.

"…………Kksshh."

The next instant—

"Ach-ah?!"

Renji delivered a nonchalant kick to Haruyo's stomach, the tips of his toes sinking into her gut. The *kigurumi* costume folded in half, soaring high into the cloudless blue sky—

"Ah—!"

—and fell back down with a thud in front of the dumbfounded spectators. Lying prostrate on the ground, Haruyo did not so much as twitch.

"……Eh? You're…joking, right? Oy… Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka is…the feared killer, the strongest of the second-years—that crazy beast is…done for?" Kurisu mumbled in confusion.

As if taking that as a signal, screams welled up from the upper classes' spectator seats.

"Ha-Haruyooooooooooo?!"

"Uaaaaaah, it can't be true?! Tell me it's not truuuuuueee!"

"Get up, get up, Haruyo! Get uuuuuuuuuuuppp!"

The commotion among Haruyo's class was especially tremendous. Some people burst into tears, others crumpled on the spot, and still others began laughing out of despair.

"…………"

In the midst of it all, Renji was unfazed. He surveyed his surroundings behind the white gas mask and then casually took off toward the goal, as though he had just remembered the race.

There was no one to obstruct his progress. Behind him lay only the silent bodies of the other five competitors…

"U-unbelievable… It's unbelievable, woooooow!! Is this a dream? Is it reality? Is it an illusion?! Following on the heels of Killing Mania, the Beast of the Gale was also defeated by a newbie! What the hell?! Just what is up with the new students this yeeeeear?! Up through the third race, the second-and third-years overpowered the first-years just like everyone expected, but the fourth and fifth races were huge upsets! It looks like there are some unthinkable monsters lurking in this year's athletic festival… Can the first-years continue their steady advance like this?! The festival has only just started, so we're expecting more crazy blood-gushing, flesh-crawling techniques yet to come, killers!"

× × ×

In contrast to the respectable fight they put up in the latter part of the Slaughter Footrace, the next two events—the Slice-and-Dice Steel Thread Leap and Guillotine Escape Game—saw Kyousuke and the other first-years forced into really close matches.

In the Slice-and-Dice Steel Thread Leap, which used a sharp steel cable in place of a long rope, almost none of the first-years had been able to leap for fear of terrible injury, and the upperclassmen had steadily overwhelmed them.

In the third event, the Guillotine Escape Game, Ayaka showed no fear, and Tomomi put up a good fight, but they couldn't match the third-year classes' times and were defeated. First-year Class B was also utterly outmatched.

Nevertheless—

"Now, the Slice-and-Dice Steel Thread Leap and the Guillotine Escape Game shouldn't be any problem. It's not about winning or losing, because you get points based on the results. You can just do your best. The critical moments are yet to come!" Kurumiya offered, reclining on a sofa in the spectators' seats and leisurely smoking a cigarette.

Next on the schedule was the Calamity Arms Race.

This was a tug-of-war-type contest in which two classes were split up on either side of the grounds and fought to grab as many of the deadly weapons lined up in the center of the field as possible, dragging them back to their respective encampments.

It was a little different from a normal tug-of-war, since the length of rope or pole had been replaced by various types of lethal armaments. Wooden bat, metal bat, meat cleaver, *naginata*, Molotov cocktail, blackjack, bambam hammer, sulfuric acid, monkey wrench, revolver…et cetera.

Participants were free to use any weapon against opposing players within six feet of wherever they recovered it.

And even though in principle it was forbidden for any student except a Public Morals Committee member to possess a weapon, each of the weapons acquired in *this* game would be *allowed to be used once in any subsequent event.*

The advantage would be huge.

"We're definitely gonna win, assholes!"

""""Oooooohhhhhh!""""

"He's here—! Finally appearing in the fourth event, it's Kyousuke Kamiya! First-year Class A is finally playing their ace in the hole, the Warehouse Butcher! And with the Bitch with Beautiful Legs—Eiri Akabane, who seduced even the Goddess of Victory—joining him on the field, it's their strongest liiiiiiiineup!"

"…Wha? Who are you calling a bitch?" Standing apart from Kyousuke and the others, who were huddled in a ring at the starting location, Eiri looked irritated.

The five participants from first-year Class A were Kyousuke, Eiri, Mohawk, who had been resurrected from the medical bay, and the duo of Kitou and Kousaka.

"*Going up against them is second-year Class A! Takamoto, Motoharu, and Takakage Yatsuzaki, collectively known as the Ripper Jacks, are in the lineup together! These three brothers carried out street slashings as a group; they're serial killers who carved up eight people with knives! Joining them is Doctor Ripper Ayako Nishikawa, and Douji Ikkoku, known for making dolls out of corpses… So this lineup is also perfect! Snatching up victory and weapons, which class will it beeeee?!"*

"This is quite an interesting combination, isn't it? Pay special attention to the movements of the three Yatsuzaki brothers."

Glaring at Kyousuke and the others from a distance of about a hundred yards were five students wearing pink jumpsuits: the three male students with their mouths covered by skull scarves, a female student wearing a white doctor's coat over her jumpsuit, and a male student holding something that looked like a ventriloquist dummy in one hand.

In the center of the grounds a *harisen* war fan, a shortsword, a sledge hammer, a bush knife, a curved *shamshir* sword, an ice pick, a whip, a wooden board, a hand grenade, a shotgun, and a metal bat were all lined up.

These eleven different deadly weapons had been randomly selected from the pool beforehand. In the same way, the competing classes had been chosen by drawing lots, and each class would participate in just one match. There was no second chance.

After each class had finished its three-minute strategy meeting—

"…Are you ready? Is everyone prepared? Well then, let's get started! Calamity Arms Race, first match, first-year Class A versus second-year Class A. Readyyyyyy…"

—Bang!

A gunshot. The fierce zero-sum game had begun.

All at once, the team members from each encampment leaped out, scrambling to reach the center first. Some students joined with others and ran in pairs, other students ran out alone, and they all swarmed for whichever weapons they had in their sights.

"Oooooohhh!"

Kyousuke was aiming for the *shamshir* that was right in the middle of the field. The wickedly curved sword had a lot of power to kill and wound, and it was the one weapon he did not want to put into the enemy's hands.

Running with all his might, Kyousuke hoped to reach his target and immediately withdraw. The plan was to retrieve the deadly weapons before the enemy class had the chance to attack.

—However, when he was still about ten yards away from the *shamshir,* he noticed another student running at about the same speed, going for the same weapon.

His mouth hidden by an ominous skull scarf, with highlights in his hair the color of entrails, was a male student of medium build. Leaning forward as he ran, his upper body nearly touching the ground, it was Takamoto Yatsuzaki. The eldest Ripper Jack brother, he was an A-rank slasher.

"Cr—"

Crap.

Kyousuke had hoped to grab the weapon first, but if he didn't, he was sure to be cut to pieces by the deadly *shamshir*. His gut gripped with fear, Kyousuke flinched.

"…Heh-heh."

That hesitation proved fatal.

"Well, hello."

Takamoto snatched up the *shamshir* and slashed wide. The flashing blade nearly cleaved into Kyousuke's chest.

"Uwah?!" Kyousuke bent over backward, dodging by a hair's breadth.

Takamoto narrowed his eyes. "How do you do, underclassman? I am Takamoto Yatsuzaki. Nice to meet you!"

As soon as he had given his name, Takamoto resumed his deadly attack. He slashed diagonally down from the shoulder, then to the side. Whistling, he swung the blade again and again. Arms, legs, ears, neck… Takamoto attempted to sever any part of Kyousuke that his sword could reach.

Kyousuke could not entirely avoid every attack, and as the wicked blade brushed his skin again and again, his white gym uniform was quickly dyed red.

"Kuh—"

"Hmm, you hold up well, don't you? I guess I should say 'as expected.'"

He would have to try to grab a weapon somehow, but Takamoto was obviously used to handling a blade. If he stretched an arm out carelessly, he risked having it immediately lopped off. However—

"Thanks a lot, upperclassman!"

"……?!"

Takamoto was slow, compared to Eiri's little sister Kagura.

Kyousuke grabbed the boy's wrist, halting the deadly dance of the *shamshir*, then pulled his right arm back. Keeping the weapon in check with his left hand, he swung at Takamoto's wide-eyed face with his right fist—

""Well, hello.""

As he was about to land the blow, two figures appeared in opposite corners of his vision. Two students wearing the same skull scarves as the first pressed in on him simultaneously from the left and right. A weapon lay before each of them—a bush knife and an ice pick—and they quickly snatched up the deadly armaments.

""How do you do, underclassman?""

"Wha—?"

The two brothers even spoke in sync as they swooped down on him. Kyousuke avoided the ice pick aimed for his eyeball but couldn't entirely dodge the knife. The top of his left shoulder split open with a splash of fresh blood.

"Ooohhh, whoooaaa?! Ayako Nishikawa slits open that Mohawk bastard's gut, Eiri Akabane nabs the shotgun, Douji Ikkoku takes on two

first-year boys, and the three brothers begin a group beatdown! Kicking away weapons from all sides, *Kyousuke Kamiya, alone in range of three opponents, gives us an unbelievable display of poweeeeeer!"*

"I am Motoharu Yatsuzaki. Nice to meet you!"

The tall, large-bodied second sibling gave his name.

"I am Takakage Yatsuzaki. Nice to meet you!"

Thrusting out the ice pick, the short, slim youngest sibling gave his name.

"Greetings from me and my brothers. The three of us together are the Ripper Jacks. Our favorite hobby is tearing weaklings apart as a group… Our special skill is cleanly stripping humans of their flesh!"

The eldest—the medium-size brother—grinned, warping the skull that covered half his face. Using the *shamshir* like a scythe, he tried to slice Kyousuke's left wrist.

"Tch—"

When Kyousuke leaped away, there was the ice pick. When he turned his head to avoid that, the bush knife was swinging downward at him. And then, again, the reversed *shamshir* flashed in the edge of his vision, moving in to block his path of retreat. Blood poured from Kyousuke's wounds, and greasy sweat oozed from his forehead.

"Th-there it is—! All three members of the Ripper Jacks are plenty skilled, but when the three brothers work together, that's when you see true terror! They'll cut up their prey with their superior triple attack! When they commit crimes, it's one minute of wonderment! It's speed that would amaze you, even at a fast-food joint! Taking on three guys like this all at once… Will even Kamiya end up dead meat?! It's a one-sided dissection show, yo, swoosh-shwoosh-swoooooosh!"

The two blades and the ice pick swooped in on him from every direction, each following its own deadly path. The fierce attack was like being tumbled in a mixer. Kyousuke was soon scored with fresh wounds.

However, Kyousuke courageously refused to retreat. He weathered their assault, staying in range of the deadly weapons, looking for any opportunity to grab one. Gradually, the three brothers began to grow impatient.

"…You sure are stubborn, huh?"

"It's already been one minute, big brother."

"He hasn't even suffered any major wounds. He's stronger than I thought!"

As time passed, their synchronized onslaught grew ever more savage, but Kyousuke, covered in bloody wounds, just barely continued to keep up. One minute passed, then two, then three, then four…

"—Kyousuke!"

Eiri shouted from behind.

"""" "……?!""""

Instantly, Kyousuke jumped away from the three brothers, slipping out of range of their weapons. He had broken through forcefully, unconcerned by the many wounds he had sustained in the fight. Turning on his heel, he ran home to his class's encampment.

"…Welcome back. You're in bad shape, huh."

Eiri greeted Kyousuke nonchalantly as he barely returned with his life intact. At her feet were the shotgun, the wooden board, the whip, the hand grenade, the sledge hammer, and the war fan.

Next to them, Kitou and Kousaka sat on the ground, their faces swollen here and there, their breathing ragged. Mohawk was—

"Gyah-ha-ha! It's an easy victory, gyah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"O-oh…is it? G-good work…"

Holding a shortsword dripping with blood and fat in one hand, Mohawk threw his head back and laughed loudly. Pink entrails spilled from his split belly, but he didn't seem to care at all.

"…*Hahh.*" Eiri let out a sigh. "Never mind the bastard who doesn't know how to die—good work to you, too. You held out well on your own… I wasn't sure whether or not to come help you in the middle of things."

"Ha-ha-ha… I just wanted to snatch up one or two weapons if I could, you know?"

Defending against the three brothers' attacks had left Kyousuke's body covered in a score of cuts and slashes. They were nearly all shallow scratches, so he didn't think they would cause any difficulties in the following matches, but…

Kyousuke smiled bitterly. It would probably be better for them to try to take the offensive from now on.

"…Idiot. If you throw your life away, there's no point, is there? Geez… Maybe you would be better off dead!"

After glaring at him reproachfully, Eiri turned away sharply.

While Kyousuke had taken on the Ripper Jacks, the rest of his class had outnumbered their opponents four to two. Eiri had led them in pressing their advantage, and they had quickly collected many weapons.

The two other upperclassmen lay sprawled out on the ground. Set upon by four opponents, they had been able to grab only the metal bat.

"…Oh man. We were too enthusiastic about hunting him, huh, big brother?"

"Yes. In the end, we didn't even get him, though. It's frustrating, right?"

"Frustrating…but enjoyable in its own way. He is prey that's worth hunting, wouldn't you say…? Heh-heh."

Eventually, the three brothers finished carrying their weapons back, and a gunshot rang out.

"Finiiiiiish, that's game over! The total for weapons collected sits at four versus seven, meaning it's the first-years' victory! The three brothers may have overwhelmed Kyousuke Kamiya with their teamwork, but it looks like, by working with his classmates, he is the real winnerrrrrr!"

"Yes, indeed. It's important to play as a team… And with that said, next is the second round. It's a matchup between first-year Class B and second-year Class B, but Miss Haruyo is still in the infirmary… Can the second-years really compete with their star player absent?"

× × ×

Without Haruyo, second-year Class B lost to first-year Class B. Then, third-year Class B won a narrow victory over third-year Class A, though two students were sent to the infirmary by Shamaya's furious strength. And after that—

They had come to the Poison Bread Russian Roulette, which resembled a scene from a Buddhist hell.

"Buh

“Yes. First-year Class A, Maina Igarashi.”

“—Huh? Huuuuuuhhh?!” Maina, who had been huddled up in a ball in the spectators’ seats, jumped up at the sudden revelation. Everyone’s gaze fixed on her at once. “Oh no… Th-this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Ignoring Maina’s sudden pallor, Busujima continued with his detailed explanation.

“She has an incredible talent, doesn’t she? Rumor has it that any food prepared by Miss Igarashi becomes a deadly toxin. Even I can’t figure out how, though… She certainly is an enigma. Of course, if you open that Pandora’s box…well, you can certainly see the results for yourselves. They don’t call her Black Pandora for nothing, after all.”

“““

Lane 1 Takaya Kiriu (Third-year Class B) Rank: A+
Lane 2 Takamoto Yatsuzaki (Second-year Class A) Rank: A
Lane 3 Eiri Akabane (First-year Class A)
Lane 4 Renko Hikawa (First-year Class B) Rank: C+
Lane 5 Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka (Second-year Class B) Rank: S
Lane 6 Saki Shamaya (Third-year Class A) Rank: S

Every class had sent out its most elite competitor.

“…Hmph.” Eiri snorted and looked at her neighbor to the right. “So you finally came out to play, eh, Renko? You still have your gas mask on, but…are you all right?”

“‘*Tch*…not really.’”

“…Huh? This is no time for your poor imitations.”

“‘…Huh? This is no time for your poor imitations.’”

“Shut up. Don’t mimic me, boob girl.”

“‘Shut up. Don’t mimic me, tiny tits.’”

“I thought I told you not to imitate me?! Just die already!”

“‘I thought I told you not to imitate me?! Just die already!’”

“……I’ll kill you.”

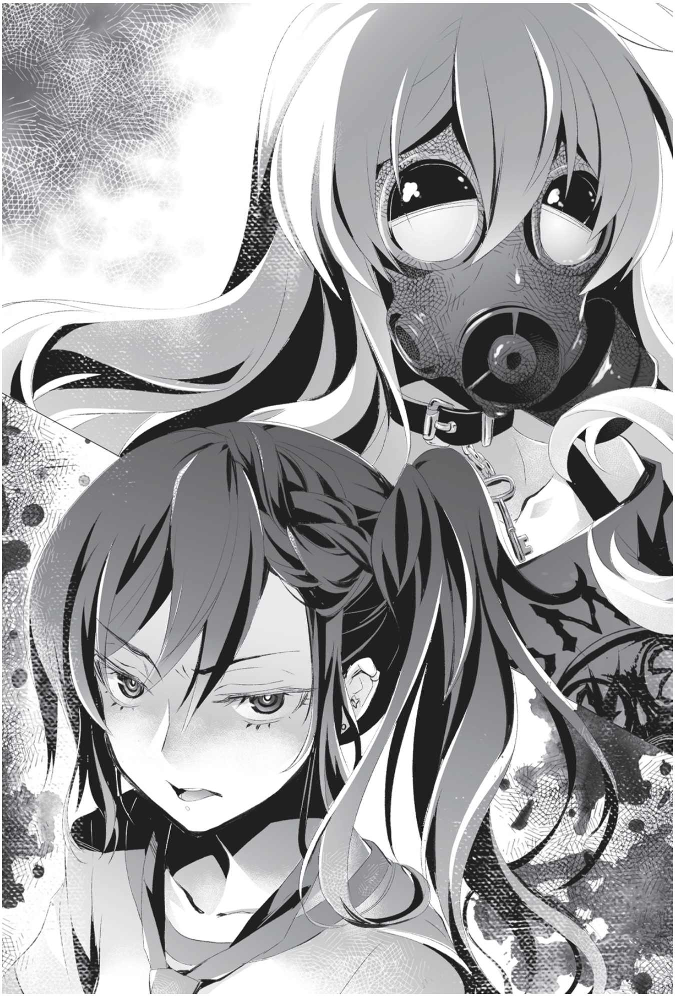
Eiri seethed with anger as Renko jokingly parroted her words back at her. Her unmotivated demeanor made a complete about-face, and she began to limber up.

“*Kksshh*. Yeah, yeah, now you’re talking!” Renko was delighted.

Haruyo, who had just returned from the infirmary, gave Renko a wide berth. “Th-this one wears a gas mask, too, hmm… I want to get my revenge, but I’m not in peak physical condition yet. It’s probably prudent not to rush into a reckless attack…”

On Haruyo’s right, Shamaya was also looking nervously toward Renko. “Th-that’s right. Best not to wake the sleeping beast.”

On the opposite side, Kiriu and Takamoto stood silently.



* * *

Before long—

The instant that the match started, first-year Class A leaped to the top spot.

"Whoa?! Sh-she's faaaaaast! What incredible speed! Eiri Akabane, leaving the upperclassmen behind with an ultra-acceleration starting daaash! She got to the card in under ten seconds?!"

"…*Fwah*. Too easy. This is boring!" Eiri yawned as she looked back at the competition. Shamaya, Haruyo, Kiriu, and Takamoto were all trying to fight one another as they raced. Renko, meanwhile, had taken a spectacular dive after Eiri tripped her up, so she had gotten a really late start.

Eiri smiled triumphantly as she turned over one of the cards. "Huh? This is—!" For a moment, she was at a loss for words. After taking a long hard look at the card she had turned over, she held it up.

"First-year Class A."

""""…………Huh?"""" Kyousuke and the others, who were waiting in the bleachers ready to attack, were stunned.

""""Whaaat?!"""" Shamaya and the other competitors were also shocked.

Kurisu clapped her hands. *"Ohh, nice reaction!"*

"I see, so it's possible for someone to choose their own class… Can she redraw?"

"Nope, according to the rules, there's no problem. It's fine for her to continue."

"Mm—" Eiri held her tongue, blushing and fidgeting.

"Well, well then… Kyousuke Kamiya? Kyousuke should…"

She designated Kyousuke, as if she was delivering a confession of love.

"Wooo!" Kurisu yelled.

From the cheering sections of the other classes, other voices called, """"Let's blow. It. UP!""""

Eiri was bright red all the way out to her ears, and with her head hanging low, she rushed over to the bleachers. “Ah, come on, shut up… H-hey! Let’s go, Kyousuke! Be good and let me…h-hunt you down!”

“O-oh…” Kyousuke took her outstretched hand, and the two ran off together.

Meanwhile, the upperclassmen who had turned over their cards after Eiri were intent on hunting their chosen prey.

“…………What the hell is that?” Complaining, Renko turned over the last card. A sigh escaped with a *kksshh* from the exhaust port of her gas mask.

“Third-year Class A, Saki Shamaya!”

“—What?” Shamaya, who had been about to rush down on a female student wearing a flour sack on her head in the first-year bleachers, suddenly stiffened. Timidly, she turned to look at Renko. “Eh? M-me…you say?”

“Yep, that’s right! I’m coming to hunt you. I’m all worked up, you know… I think a little murder will be great for letting off some steam, eh?”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what the—? This first-year has chosen, of all people, Killing Maniaaa! Hey-hey-hey-hey…what the hell, has she got a death wish or something? If she gets too carried away, she’s bound to get herself killed! HA-HA-HA-HA!” Kurisu burst into maniacal laughter at Renko’s declaration of war.

The upperclassmen jeered at Renko along with her and cheered for Shamaya. “Ah-ha-ha-ha, what an idiot! She’s a hard-core idiot!” “Should we say that she’s a daredevil or that she doesn’t know her place…?” “She’s dead, that first-year.” “No need to hold back! Kill ’er, Shamaya!” “Beat her at her own game!” “You should destroy her big breasts.” “Wreck. Her. Shit! Wreck. Her. Shit!”

On the other hand, Shamaya herself was—

“Ee-eek?! No, th-that’s…e-e-e-e-e-everyone? I-I’m the chair of the Public Morals Committee, am I not? I could n-n-n-n-never use such violence…toward a n-new s-s-s-student! Therefore, um…umm…um, ah, aaaaaahhh…”

Trying desperately to preserve her dignity, Shamaya frantically searched her surroundings for an escape route. However, as Renko drew closer, she sank to the ground, overwhelmed by terror.

“Gyaaaaaahhh?! I won’t resist, I won’t resiiiiiist! Don’t hurt me! B-be gentle…ee…eeaaahhh, oh myyyyyyyyy?!”

X X X

“U-ummm…th-that’s our Public Morals Committee chair, all right! If her right cheek is struck, she offers the left one, and if she’s hit on the head, she offers her ass. She’s overwhelming the new student with her generosity! H-how kind… You’re too kind, Saki Shamaya! ‘Nothing is so strong as gentleness, and nothing is so gentle as real strength’—that’s how the saying goes, and surely that’s the case here, folks!! She’s the paragon of generosity, the embodiment of generosity, the personification of generosity! That is to say, the strongest? You’re the strongest!”

Renko was dragging a thoroughly exhausted Shamaya around by her hair. Forcing herself to commend the spectacle, Kurisu applauded, “*Wooooooonnnnnnnnnderful!*”

Shamaya’s wildly enthusiastic followers also applauded with her, though it wasn’t clear they entirely understood what was going on.

Kurisu wiped the sweat from her brow. “…Phew. *Murder Princess has many fans, huh…? Oh geez, stay focused on the broadcast, Kurisu… Ooooookay everyone! Next up is the second half of the competition! And just like in the first half, each class has chosen their best warrior!! I’ll introduce them; in lane one is—*”

“It’s meeeeeeeeeeee, gyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“FUUUUUUUUUUCK!” Making a throat-cutting gesture, Kurisu pointed her thumb toward the ground. *“I told you, don’t interrupt the broadcast—! Don’t you ever learn, you chicken-headed shitbird?! And what’s with the speedy resurrection, you immortal bastard!! Die!”*

His split belly had already been stitched up. He really was a tough guy.

The female student in lane two snorted “…Hmph” at Mohawk, who was acting cool in the same way as always. “Don’t yell, underclassman! But then, I guess even that grating roar of yours will change into a death wail before too long…so go ahead—do your best to raise hell, you cocky, weak bastard!”

The name of this girl in a long white jacket, carrying a wooden sword, with ULTIMATE EVIL written on her cheek in permanent marker, was Anji Gosou. Part of third-year Class A, she was Arch Enemy, a member of the Public Morals Committee who dressed like a female gangster.

Next to her were Faceless Amon Abashiri, his face hidden behind yellowed bandages, Ripper Jack Takakage Yatsuzaki, and Slaughter Maid Renji Hikawa. It was certainly a prominent lineup.

Unlike the Slaughter Footrace, no one leaped to immediately challenge Mohawk. But when the race started—

“Hyah-haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

““““……?!””””

Evading Gosou’s wooden sword, Mohawk jumped out in front. He also shook loose of Abashiri’s and Takakage’s pursuits and grimaced with his piercing-studded face. “Yer slow, slow, slow, you bastards! Next to sweet Kurumiya, you look like yer standing still, whoo! I get the shit beaten out of me every day just for fun!”

Compared to his wicked, snarling opponents, Mohawk looked weak, but in reality he was surprisingly strong. If they didn’t take him seriously, they would be met by a painful revelation.

Mohawk, who had escaped the melee without delay, ran all one hundred meters in the top spot. “Hee-hee-hee! Which class is my prey gonna come from?”

He licked his lips and flipped over a card, hoisting it up over his bright red Mohawk hairstyle.

“Third-year Class B! In a one-on-one fight I’m screwed, but I designate the *whole class*! Come at me all at once, small friiiiiies! Hyaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He tore up the card and threw it away.

““““…………””””

The mood died. For a moment, there was silence.

“Huuuuuuh?! Did he say the whole class? He said the whole class, didn’t he?! That means I can join in, too, right?! Bring it on, you bastard, grraaaaaahhh!” Tossing aside her microphone along with any pretense of responsibility, Kurisu dashed onto the field.

The students in the spectators’ seats also rushed out after her and swarmed Mohawk.

“Gyah-haaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

A death wail—Mohawk was the one to face a painful reality. He had scorned his opponents and ignored any and all danger, and this was the result.

“Idiot.” “Yep, idiot.” “Sure is an idiot.” “He’s an idiot.” “Idiot…”

All the other students in his own class were beyond anger. They couldn’t help but be amazed.

Looking sidelong at Mohawk, who was being beaten to a pulp, the remaining competitors each turned over a card.

“…Oh? My prey is in first-year Class A.”

Among them, the one who had drawn Kyousuke’s class was Anji Gosou. Wearing a bold smile, the Savage Sukeban turned her head and set her eyes on Kyousuke.

"The one I will hunt will of course be Kyousuke Kamiya—that's what I'd like to say, but I'll leave him for Saki! And Eiri Akabane—I'll concede her life to Saki, too, shall I? Yes! It's not that I've lost my nerve! There's nothing to fear in beating the hell out of Saki's favorite and then being beaten by her later. It's because I am Arch Enemy! I take supreme pleasure in murder for its own sake, fwa-ha-ha!"

""……""

Kyousuke and Eiri looked at each other as Gosou laughed maniacally, distorting the words *ultimate evil* written on her face. They wondered if perhaps this was the pitiful female student Shamaya had apparently beaten half to death so many times at school.

Moreover, this upperclassman was the one who had gotten caught trying to escape during Summer Death Camp…

"Well, then. Which of your heads shall I take?"

"……Oh no."

"—Hmm?"

Gosou's gaze fixed on a certain female student in the bleachers. The terrified girl avoided meeting that gaze with her own flaxen eyes—an obvious sign of weakness.

Gosou's eyes shone with predatory insight. "Oy, little one over there! I'm hunting you now! Hun. Ting. You!" She pointed with her wooden sword.

"……Huh?" Maina looked entirely lost. She glanced right, looked left, peered behind her, gazed upward, and after all that, eventually pointed at her own face. "Uh, um……me?"

"That's riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiight!" Gosou came at her, swinging her wooden sword, her long white coat flaring dramatically behind her.

"Huhhhhhh?!" Maina tumbled out of her seat.

Ayaka, who had been nearby, quickly distanced herself. "Do your best, Crafty Cat!" she called. "Try to turn the tables on her!"

"Whaaa?! No way, no way, no way! S-someone heeeeeelp?!"

"Stupid girl! No one is coming to help you!! Come on, come on, cry, scream, shake! Your life ends here, fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Arch Enemy attacked with loud, wicked laughter.

"Eeeeeeek?! Oh no, ohhhhh gosh—" Maina frantically turned on her heels and tried to flee. "Aiee?!"

Her path was blocked by her seat. She dived into the bleachers, headfirst.

—Immediately, catastrophe descended.

"Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Maina, in state of total panic, floundered and flapped her arms and legs, lost her balance as she tried to get up, and, violently thrashing back and forth, pulled absolutely everything and everyone around her into the maelstrom of destruction.

Anyone who had taken too long to run away was dragged into the turmoil, and even the students who had immediately retreated were hit, crushed, and smashed one by one as chairs and various other furnishings were pulled up and thrown about.

“Uaaah?! Maina, calm down! I’m begging you, cal—gyah?!”

“Fwah?! What is this, a hurricane?! Run away, everyone, really ruuuuuun!”

“Gyaaah?! My arm, my aaaaaarm?!”

“Hee-hee-hee…heeeeee?!”

Almost all of her classmates were caught up in the tempest of atrocities.

Gosou, too, had stepped on the hem of her own long white coat and tripped, and now lay agape on the ground about fifteen feet in front of Maina. “—What the hell is this?”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

A heavy sofa crashed down right in front of Gosou’s eyes and nose. She toppled over in a somersault and scrambled away. “Eeeeeehhh?! Wha—wh-wh-wh-wh-what the hell… What on earth is happening?!”

“It’s Maina Igarashi’s clumsiness, and you’re dead meat! You did this, Gosou, you idiot!!” Kurumiya shouted furiously, taking refuge beside Gosou on the bleachers. “Of all the people, you had to choose Black Pandora! Eee, she’s not done yet?!” Her eyes narrowed as she stared in the direction Maina had fallen.

“Oh shit! Igarashi, *don’t let go with your right hand*, even if you die. Absolutely, absolutely do not let go!!”

“………..Huh?”

Hearing her teacher’s desperate voice, Maina slowly opened her eyes.

What was she doing, and how did she get there—? In Maina’s left hand was a pin with a ring on it, and in her right hand she held the hand grenade that their class had acquired during the Calamity Arms Race.

“Ah…aah…aaaaaahhh…”

Maina’s eyes opened wide, and her face began to twitch.

“Wait!” Kurumiya shouted. “It won’t explode just because you’ve removed the safety pin! If you replace the pin without letting go of the safety lever on the main part that you’re holding, there’s no problem —”

“N-nyoooooooooooo!!”

Maina threw the hand grenade.

"You moroooooon!"

The pineapple-shaped explosive flew through the air, rolled across the ground, fell underfoot a group that had been trying to run away from the spectators' seats, and then—

""""......Ah.""""

—A white flash.

Then the sound of a tremendous explosion, and an enormous hail of dust and debris.

* * *

"......I'b sowwy."

Sitting curled up on the replacement bleachers, Maina apologized frailly.

The morning events had just concluded, and lunch break had started, but since more than half of the first-year Class A seats were now vacant, their section was quiet and desolate.

Looking down at Maina hanging her head, Tomomi glowered. "—Huh? What good is 'I'b sowwy,' you clumsy idiot? Thanks to you, we're totally wrecked! How are you gonna fix this?!"

"Waah...! S-soww—"

"I said, 'I'b sowwy' doesn't cut it!" Tomomi was furious and kicked Maina's seat as hard as she could.

"Eeek?!" Maina shrieked and started to cry, at her wits' end. "Waaahhh..."

However, Tomomi did not let up. "Shinji and Arata and Kagerou are all majorly injured because of you! They put up a good fight, but they're gone. You've gotta be shitting me! If you got time to apologize, how about bringing them back, you—"

"That's too far." Eiri interrupted Tomomi's heated assault. "Maina is definitely guilty, but it's no use persecuting her, is it...? You're only making the atmosphere worse, so be quiet for a while. You're annoying."

"—Huh? Why are you getting mad at me?! This useless girl is the problem!" Tomomi raised her voice even louder as she responded to Eiri's prickly argument.

"...Hmph," Eiri snorted. "If you're gonna go there, you haven't been much help, either, Tomomi. If you're going to butt in, I'd rather you did it during the matches, rather than at times like this."

"Faah! What the hell is that supposed to mean, Eiri? I'm trying my hardest, and I'm not getting in your way!! So where do you get off talking to me like that—"

"Quit it. You both are too irritable," Kyousuke said wearily, stepping between Eiri and Tomomi's angry glares.

After Maina had panicked during the Seek-and-Destroy Challenge and set off the hand grenade, leaving at least five of their classmates unable to fight—somehow they had been able to get through the following event, Very Large (One Ton) Ball Rolling, but the problem was the next event.

The final event of the morning, Apocalyptic Cavalry Battle, was not a competition against another class but against an entire *year*.

Many points were awarded for winning, and it was a round-robin fight in which everyone participated, but with nearly half of their class in the infirmary, the number of people left to fight for first-year Class A was extremely small. First-year Class B, too, had been completely defeated by their betters. And then, even more people had been sent to the infirmary during the incident…

Only eight of their seventeen classmates were left in the bleachers. The others would probably return after a short rest, but their combat capabilities would be questionable at best.

Ayaka, who had been caught up in Maina's clumsiness, puffed out her cheeks and groaned. "…Hmm. It's dangerous to compete like this, isn't it?" Her gaze rested on the scoreboard, hung horizontally on the tent.

The scores on it read—

Third-year Class A	109 points
Third-year Class B	114 points
Second-year Class A	85 points
Second-year Class B	90 points
First-year Class A	99 points
First-year Class B	103 points

"……Fourth out of six classes, hmm."

"Yeah. But there are only fifteen points' difference between us and first place…"

From the scoreboard, it looked as though they had been fighting hard, but first-year Class A had suffered an overwhelmingly large number of casualties. The events would only get more dangerous in the afternoon, and taking into account the higher stakes, the battle before them seemed grim.

In truth, Kurumiya's words "The morning is not about getting points, it's about cutting down their fighting strength" and "The real battle for points starts in the afternoon" had been the foundations of their strategy for the athletic festival. Now that they had completely failed to follow that strategy, the class's morale was failing.

The surviving students were by no means unharmed, least of all Kyousuke, who had suffered at the hands of the three brothers and was currently wrapped in bandages and covered in plasters. It wasn't clear whether he would be able to fight to the bitter end of the afternoon in this state…

"What the fuuuuuuuuuuuuck!" A violent bellow crashed over them. "What's with those faces, you bastards?! You look just like the remnants of a defeated army, don'cha? The competition isn't finished yet! If you lose in your minds, it's all over, though!! Look alive, look alive!"

"M-Miss Kurumiya…"

Kurumiya had returned from surveying the situation in the infirmary and now stood glaring at the spectators' seats. As Kyousuke and the others looked around at one another, Kurumiya let out a little sigh. "Sure, we've suffered some losses. And yes, our fighting strength has been diminished. But who cares? The cornerstone of our class, Kyousuke Kamiya, is not done in yet, Eiri Akabane is uninjured, little Kamiya and Igarashi have only taken minor wounds. Saotome is… seriously hurt but not entirely unable to move. The others are in the same state, so if push comes to shove, we can force a bit more out of them, even if they almost die. Anyhow, our main force is mostly untouched, so we can still shoot for an overall victory just fine. Keep fighting! And don't give up! Got it? If you understand, then even though it looks bleak, eat up and get your energy back."

As she battered them with encouraging words, Kurumiya lowered some kind of rectangular package. It was big, about waist height, and wrapped in bright red cloth.

"Uh, ummm…?"

As Kyousuke and the others watched, perplexed, Kurumiya began to spread out a picnic blanket behind the bleachers. She set her package on top of the charming bear-print blanket.

"—Hey. I made you a lunch box with top-grade ingredients. Be grateful and eat up, piglets!"

Kurumiya opened the wrapping cloth, revealing a twelve-layer stacked box packed tight with a massive quantity of food. From standard lunch box items like rolled omelets and Vienna sausages, to Chinese food like pepper-steak stir fry and chili shrimp, to Japanese offerings like grilled fish and stewed food, to meat dishes like hamburger steaks and roast beef, to rice balls…et cetera. Each tier had a different theme, packed to the brim with handmade food.

""""

others didn't know how to react.

Kurumiya, who had finished setting the food out on the picnic blanket, raised an eyebrow. "…Hmm? What are you waiting for? Hurry up and get over here. It's a lunch box, so I made it in advance, but I can vouch for the flavor. The rice balls are filled with pickled plums, salmon, cod roe, or tuna salad. Heh-heh-heh…"

"…Um, Miss Kurumiya." While everyone else sat reeling with astonishment, Ayaka raised her hand.

"What is it, little Kamiya? Go on and say it—your cooking is ten million, ten thousand times better, right?!"

"What are you scheming? I-it's scary…brrr."

"—Ah?"

"Yeah, yeah, I agree! It's like, totally bizarro for Miss Kurumiya to be nice, you know. It feels way weird…"

"You gotta be kidding me!" Kurumiya shouted at Ayaka and Tomomi, who were holding each other in fear. "Do you wanna eat my iron pipe instead, assholes?! The food's fine, so shut up and get over here, or I'll send you idiots to the infirmary!!"

× × ×

"…Well, how is it? And be honest with me, Kamiya," Kurumiya asked quietly.

They were seated on the picnic blanket, harmoniously (?) enjoying a meal around the lunch basket.

"Huhhh?! Ah, let me see… Um…," Kyousuke answered while cramming a rice ball down his throat, "I-it's of…ordinary deliciousness!"

"—Ordinary…deliciousness? What the hell does that even mean?"

"Huuhh?! I mean, it doesn't have any particularly intense flavor or anything, but…"

"Don't tell me what it's not. Do you want to be disciplined?"

"Eeek?! S-sorryyy!"

Glaring at Kyousuke, who was prostrating himself in apology, Kurumiya snorted. "Hmph."

The food was tasty enough, and there was nothing particularly off about it, but the person who had made it was just too intimidating—every time Kyousuke or any of the others moved even a single bite toward their mouths, Kurumiya launched into a furious cross-examination that kept them on their toes. An unspeakable feeling of tension hung in the air.

"—Oy, Igarashi. How is that rolled omelet? I know I can make those well."

"Eeek?!" Maina started and dropped the rolled omelet she had been eating. A vein bulged in Kurumiya's forehead.

"Eeek?!" Maina shuddered and picked the omelet back up. "Th-th-th-three-second rule! *Nom, nom*, it's sweet and delicious! J-just like you, Miss Kurumiya! Ah-ha…ah-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha…"

"Heh-heh-heh…isn't it? I use honey in place of the sugar. That way, it's softer and finishes with a mild flavor."

"…Hmm? I prefer it when they aren't that sweet, though," Eiri muttered nonchalantly.

"Shut up, Akabane. I didn't ask for your opinion!" Kurumiya snapped, climbing to her feet. "Oy, assholes. Do you have enough to drink? I brought tea. You can have sports drinks, too. There are still plenty of cold ones, so feel free—"

"Wow, what's this, Hijiri's home cooking? Incredible!"

As Kurumiya turned toward the cooler, Reiko sauntered up to the bleachers. She was wearing her white lab coat over her class uniform, and her eyes were twinkling. "How unexpectedly feminine of you, Hijiri dear! You'll make a good bride someday.—Right, Renji?"

"…………"

Renji, who was accompanying her, did not respond.

"Oh?" Kurumiya's bloodlust spiked. "What is the enemy leader doing here? Get lost, idiot."

"Eeeeeehhh?!" Reiko clung to their teacher, protesting her callous treatment. "Mean! That's so mean, Hijiri! And despite all we've been through together. How can you spew such abuse? I'm hurt! You've hurt me, Hijiriii!"

"Geez, you're irritating! Shut up and piss off already. No, don't press your damn tits on me, fuck off!"

"Uahh?!" Reiko tumbled away and fell on her backside. "Owww… Really, you know my body is weak! Don't be so rough!!"

"No way. Right now you and I are mutual enemies. Knowing that, you march right into enemy territory, just the two of you. You wouldn't have room to complain, even if you were forcibly violated, would you? By Kamiya, maybe?"

"Me?!"

"Yeah. No need to hold back—do it!"

"No, no…"

"Ee?! Y-you beast! Renjiiiiii! Crush this rapist—"

"You must be joking. He's not really gonna do it, virgin."

"Bwuh?!"

Exasperated, Kurumiya thrust her iron pipe into Reiko's mouth, cutting off her screams.

After a short struggle, Reiko spat the pipe out—“*Pueh!* Hang on!”—while blushing bright red. “What do you think you’re doing?! I mean, you’ve given yourself away again, haven’t you?! Even if it’s you, I won’t forgive this, Hijiri! I was already mad! Ren—”

“Should I stick it somewhere lower instead?”

“

“Hijiri, that hurts! You’re hurting me, Hijiri!”

“You told him to ‘crush’ Kamiya, right? However, even if you were joking, Kamiya is *my student*. I won’t just stand by and watch him die. This morning he did his best to stay out of the fight, but this afternoon I’m going to have him do some crushing of his own… Our first-year Class A is going to win a total victory! Not your Class B.”

“……Oh?” Reiko’s expression changed. “This is unexpected. You’re awfully tenacious. I know that for you and Renko both, this is a bitter pill to swallow, but, Hijiri dear, we’re going to crush you just the same. My daughter’s future depends on it… I will absolutely win. After all, even if I lose, I win.”

“……Eh? What do you mean by that?”

“Heh-heh!” Smiling, Reiko took her eyes off Kurumiya. “Kyousuke. I got to watch you in the morning competitions, but you’re even less of a big deal than I thought. It was anticlimactic. My children could destroy you one-handed.—Right, Renji?”

“…………”

Renji, of course, did not respond. He stood there, apathetic as always, staring at Kyousuke from behind his ivory gas mask.

“Not just Kyousuke, either… These other kids are all the same. If they stand in our way, I’m telling you we’ll crush them without mercy. We’ll kick them around like pebbles.”

Listening to Reiko’s remarks, every member of first-year Class A grew angry.

“…Oh really? If you’re so sure, go ahead and give it a try, auntie.”

“Hah. Ayaka doesn’t like that person one bit! She’s Renko’s mother, so Ayaka wanted to be friends with her, but…if this is how it’s going to be, then there’s no avoiding it. Shall we get rid of her?”

“Let’s get rid of her! Let’s kill her and cut her to pieces and cook her right now, and mix her in with the side dishes!”

“Oh gosh…”

And so on. While most of his classmates burned with intense rivalry, Kyousuke struggled to respond. He had every reason to come back at her with strong words, but—Kyousuke found himself hesitating.

I want to win, he thought. But then, from somewhere in his heart, he asked himself, *Do I really?* Victory would mean winning Reiko’s approval.

His goal in the athletic festival was nothing less than a total win, but when it came to the question of Reiko’s approval and whether he wanted her to support Renko’s amorous aspirations…Kyousuke didn’t know the answer just then. He wondered whether he might not mind defeating the other first-year class as planned and thus being separated from Renko.

What did he, himself, *want* to happen with Renko, he wondered—

“…………”

“My, my, what a disappointing leader you have.” Reiko shrugged casually at Kyousuke, who held his tongue and hung his head. “Heh-heh, all righty then! Whether you feel like fighting or not, the fact is that I’m going to thoroughly smash you all! So you’d better get yourselves ready!”

She stood up to go after tossing out that last provocative line… “Oh, and, ah, Hijiri?” Reiko looked at Kurumiya. “I’d like you to go ahead and let go of me now.”

Kurumiya’s right hand still had a tight grip on Reiko’s right breast. Looking back at Reiko with a strange, stiff face, she laughed. “…Let go?! Why do I have to let go of you? Do you think I’m going to overlook an idiot who casually strolled into enemy territory? Heh-heh-heh… Come on! I’ll show you plenty of tough love.”

“Eh?! No way…Hijiri, time out! Please, wait—Ow?!” Reiko whined as Kurumiya began to drag her away. “That hurts! Renji! Renjiiiiii, help meeeeeeeeeeee!”

“…………!”

At Reiko’s command, the motionless monster launched into action. Closing the distance between himself and his mother in a single step, he started a strenuous battle to rescue his mistress from Kurumiya’s clutches.

For the remainder of the break, Kyousuke and the rest of first-year Class A got to finish their meal while watching a true clash of monsters—“Kurumiya vs. Renji.”

Chaotic Mosh Pit

WHAT'S LEFT AFTER THE CATASTROPHE

FOURTH EVENT

Rank S

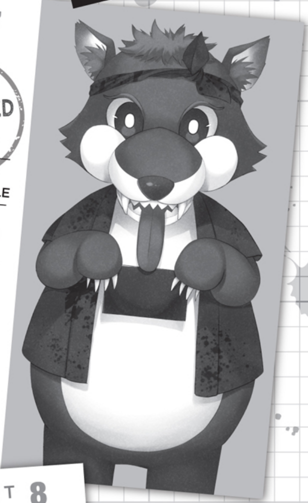
SURVEILLANCE TARGET 7

HARUYO GEVAUDAN TANAKA

COSTUMED KILLER

Class : SECOND-YEAR CLASS B | **Nickname :** BEAST OF THE GALE

One must not be fooled by her sweet *kigurumi* costume: This extremely secretive girl is a dangerous killer with no mercy for anyone who observes her bare face. It's rumored that her fluffy *kigurumi* outfit is a powered suit that increases her physical abilities or that it is a restraint designed to hold back her frightful power; these rumors have been exceptionally persistent.



Rank A+

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 8

AMON ABASHIRI

COVETOUS KILLER

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS B | **Nickname :** FACELESS

Also known as the Face Flayer. Originally a narcissistic, handsome young man, he suffered major burns and was driven insane by the scarring of his face. Whenever he catches sight of a comely man in the street, he stalks and kills him, peeling off the skin of his victim's face to wear home. He has become a bizarre serial murderer, a tenacious killer who does not let his chosen prey get away.

Chaotic Mosh Pit

WHAT'S LEFT AFTER THE CATASTROPHE

FOURTH EVENT

"Nom, nom… *Huh, is break time up already? Seriously? I'm not done eating ye—Ah, hey?! You give me back my 'High-Grade Garbage' bentoooooo!"*

"…All right then, okay. The second half has begun! The live broadcast will continue, with me, Kirito Busujima, here as always babysitting Miss Arisugawa—"

"FUCK! This is Kurisu Arisugawa comin' at you! And I've barely even eaten because the whole damn break time was taken up by long-winded explanations and meetings. I mean, you gotta be fuckin' kidding me! Die! You awful old bat—"

—Bong!

Before Kurisu could finish, Mizuchi knocked her out and dragged her away.

The curtain opened on the second half of the athletic festival with the gunshot. The first match to be held was the Unhinged Obstacle Course. During this race, a four-person relay team would have to make it across a two-hundred-meter track littered with eight different types of obstacles, a Spiked-Bat Spin, a Caltrop Balance Beam, Barbed Wire Wickets, a Dead Sea Pool, Poison Hell, Antidote Candy, a Monkey Bars Minefield, and the Wall of Death.

The large-scale obstacles, which had taken the whole intermission to set up, were all very dangerous, which meant there were a lot of victory points on the line. This important contest could determine the course of the rest of the athletic festival.

"Take your marks. Geeeeeet set… Go!"

First-year Class A was the first to jump out ahead the moment the start was signaled. Their runner was Eiri, whose speed was unequaled. When she arrived one step ahead of everyone else at the first obstacle, the Spiked-Bat Spin, Eiri picked up a spiked bat, put the grip end to her forehead, and started spinning around. Once, twice…

“Excuse me.”

Eiri’s third rotation was interrupted by Heartless Mei Kuroki, from third-year Class B, who had caught up with her. Kuroki snatched up her spiked bat, took aim at Eiri’s side, and swung wide.

“Tch—” Eiri paused her spinning to dodge Kuroki’s attack.

Gaining momentum, Kuroki put the handle of the bat to her forehead and completed one rotation.

“Excuse me.”

Again, Kuroki swung her weapon at Eiri’s head with both hands.

“Ah, really, how irritating!”

Ducking to evade the second blow, Eiri undauntedly pressed the grip end of her bat back to her forehead and, as she spun, countered with a sweeping kick. Though they were required to complete a total of ten nonconsecutive rotations to clear this first obstacle, Eiri made sure to slip in a counterattack whenever there was a spare moment—

“—Guah?!”

—because if, like Michirou, she had focused only on clearing the obstacle, her defenseless body would have been an easy target for another student’s spiked bat, and she would have suffered a similarly agonizing fate.

“Luu. Luu. Laaa. ♪ Luu. Luu. Laaaaaa. ♪”

Whereas students like Ronaldo, who focused only on attacking the competition, failed to complete any rotations.

It was indeed a surreal scene, the students exchanging blows with spiked bats in the designated rotation zone and occasionally spinning haphazardly on their weapons.

Furthermore—

“Gyaaaaaah?!”

After they slipped through the melee surrounding the Bat Spin, another obstacle awaited them—the Caltrop Balance Beam. Scattered around the four-inch-wide and sixteen-foot-long balance beam was a carpet of caltrops.

The competitors, still dizzy from turning in circles on the spiked bats, found it almost impossible to cross the whole balance beam and tumbled down onto the sharp spikes below. The caltrop-covered ground was quickly awash in blood as the fallen students writhed in agony.

“And currently in first place we have third-year Class A. Their long white coats are getting dyed bright red as they challenge the balance beam! After them, second-year Class B has arrived at the balance beam. First-year Class A and third-year Class B, who kicked off this fierce battle, have also finally broken through the spiked bats! Second-year Class A is…ah, finally they’ve started spinning around. And the competitor from first-year Class B who suffered a terrible beating looks like he’s about done for.”

"Kuh, kuh-kuh… You narrowly escaped death, clown… If I hadn't held back Azrael's terrible fury, you would be…dead meat…about no…now…guh, guaaahhh!"

"…Lame. Why did they even bother bringing him along?" Eiri grumbled as she easily crossed the balance beam. Dodging a final swing from Kuroki's baton, she covered the remaining distance to the finish line unhindered.

In third place after third-year Class A and second-year Class B, Eiri tied the class color sash around the next runner for their team. "Sorry… I couldn't take first place. Do your best!"

"Hyah-haaaaaah! Leave it to me—I'll turn this around right away!"

Mohawk, wearing the sash, pushed off the ground at a sprint. On the course ahead, the third obstacle, the Barbed Wire Wickets, lay in wait. Mohawk dived without hesitation into the dense mesh woven out of barbed wire.

Paying no mind to the sharp metal thorns cutting into his flesh, Mohawk pushed through the anguish. He overtook a male student in a long white coat as he broke through the barbed netting.

"It itches, it itches, gyah-ha-ha! That level of pain doesn't even register! For me, this isn't an obstacle course. It's a reward race!"

Next up was the fourth obstacle, the Dead Sea Pool—again without hesitation, he jumped into the pool, filled with water with a 30 percent concentration of salt. Mohawk remained calm as his body, covered in cuts, sank into the salty water. Submerged up to his chest, Mohawk quickly splashed his way across two-thirds of the pool…

"…Oh? He's much faster than I thought."

He pursued Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka from second-year Class B, who was currently in first place. Her *kigurumi* costume was tattered and torn but not so badly that the person inside was exposed. The pool was, true to its name, a "deathly" sea to the injured competitors, but to Haruyo it might as well have been normal water.

"Oh-ho-ho!" Haruyo held up an arm to the surprised Mohawk. "As your prize for being able to catch up with me, I'll give you a taste of my fist, underclassman… Bonecrusher Fist!"

"Gya-ha?!"

"Acha!"

Haruyo struck Mohawk on the forehead. There was no immediate effect. Mohawk quickly resumed splashing forward, until suddenly—

"Hgeh?!"

Just as he placed one hand on the edge of the pool, Mohawk spat up fresh blood and collapsed. Haruyo pushed aside his body, floating in the bright red water, on her way out of the pool. The competitors for third-year Class A and third-year Class B overtook Mohawk after Haruyo, and Kyousuke's class fell to fourth place.

"Get up, you idiot!" Kurumiya screamed, rising from her sofa in the spectators' seats. "Why aren't you moving, Mohawk?! Stand uuuuuup!"

"Uugh… Ku-Kurumiya baby?" Hearing her frenzied pleas, Mohawk opened his eyes just in time to see the runner from second-year Class A overtake him, leaving his class in fifth place.

Meanwhile, the competitor for first-year Class B, still in last place —

"Kyah?! M-my flour sack… My face is showing! Noooooo!"

Bob, whose flour sack had torn, covered her bare face with both hands and stopped right in the middle of the barbed wire netting. The gap left by her class's first runner continued to widen.

"Ah, now it certainly looks like the first-years are having a hard fight. Can they possibly come back from this far behind? Currently, second-year Class B is in first place! Following behind them is—"

"Beg your pardon, but this is where you exit the stage!"

"…………Huh?"

As the male student turned to look, Shamaya swung a hatchet down into the back of his head—she had acquired the weapon during the Calamity Arms Race.

—*Thunk.* The hatchet made a dull sound, and the male student fell.

Licking the blood-covered blade, Shamaya grinned ecstatically. "Oh-ho-ho! This really is the best… The feeling of this thick mass of iron as it smashes bones! And the taste of blood as it winds around my tongue! Ah, I am truly revitalized. All the stress I built up during the morning is just melting awaaaaaay. More…more, I want to savor it…"

"Eee—"

Looking down at a frightened young man in a *happi* coat, Shamaya brandished the hatchet. Her emerald-colored eyes glittered grotesquely.

"Oh, scary, scary. That's our Killing Mania, huh."

"Ah…ah…"

Nearby, a tall boy with his mouth hidden by a skull scarf—the second brother of the Ripper Jacks, Motoharu Yatsuzaki of second-year Class A—and a wheezing student whose face was covered in eerie yellowed bandages—Faceless Amon Abashiri of third-year Class B—ran past. While attacking each other, the two came to the fifth obstacle, Poison Hell, and were confronted by a swarm of snakes and frogs and lizards and centipedes and spiders and bees and hairy caterpillars.

"Goodness, I, of all people…I was in a complete rapture!" Shamaya hefted her hatchet overhead.

"Gyah?!"

She brought the blade down on the male student's head. "The match must take priority, mustn't it? I shall restrain myself this much."

"……*Twitch, twitch.*"

Leaving behind her weakly convulsing victim, Shamaya leaped into the poison pit. Swarmed by innumerable venomous creatures, she followed after Motoharu and Abashiri, who were struggling hard.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho! Do you think I'll allow something like this to stop *moi*?" Gripping her weapon tightly, Shamaya slaughtered each and every venomous creature in her path.

"Aaaaaahhh?! My pets, my friends… They're being tragically killed en masse!! Bite! Sting! Scratch! Everyoooooone!"

Snakes were cut right in half, lizards were bisected, bees crashed to the ground, spiders were crushed underfoot… No kind of fang or stinger or claw was able to touch Shamaya's skin. With skillful defensive movements and expert weapon handling, Murder Princess unleashed her fury.

"…We screwed up, huh? I should have also brought along my own weapon—Guh?!"

"Ah…ah…"

Shamaya's deadly assault did not stop with the venomous creatures. Her honey-colored hair fluttered behind her as she attacked Motoharu and Abashiri as well. Sleeves flapping, Shamaya's long white coat was quickly stained red. The atrocity of her total domination was overwhelming.

Witnessing that spectacle—

"Wow, amazing… Miss Bitch is really strong, after all."

Finally coming to a stop in front of the Poison Hell was the third runner from first-year Class A. Ayaka's dark eyes were wide, but they did not show the slightest hint of fear. Rather…

"Tee-hee. Well, it doesn't matter anyway, does it?"

Mockery. Humming a cheerful tune, Ayaka unwrapped a cloth bundle to reveal a *shotgun*. Loosening the choke and adjusting her grip, Ayaka leveled the gun with both hands.

"…Oh my?" Shamaya's eyes opened wide as she noticed Ayaka, but she was already too late.

"Bye-bye, whore."

Without the slightest hesitation, Ayaka pulled the trigger. Shotgun shells exploded from the muzzle of the gun, striking the venomous creatures along with Shamaya and the other competitors.

“Kyaaah, oh myyy?!” “What the?” “Ah…ah…”

“My friiiiiieeeeeendssssss?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Ayaka fired wildly. Twice, three times, four times, five times, six times, seven times—Flesh burst open and blood sprayed everywhere in the pit.

Ayaka never stopped grinning maniacally. “Ah-ha, ah-ha-ah-ha, ah-ha-ha…ah, that was fun! Obstacle race? What’s that? *Ayaka will take care of anything in her way!* What an idiot…tee-hee. A real idiot!”

“A-Ayaka…”

Lowering the gun, Ayaka walked on, kicking through the carcasses of the venomous creatures. Shamaya, covered in blood, both her own and others’, stared at the girl in shock.

But the younger Kamiya simply smiled happily. “Oh good, you survived! We would have lost points if I had killed you, and I wouldn’t have been able to graduate together with my big brother. I really went easy on you, you know? You should be grateful for Ayaka’s kindness. But—”

Ayaka’s smile abruptly disappeared, and she turned her head. Her lightless eyes looked at Motoharu, who was staring intensely up at Ayaka from where he lay prostrate on the ground in a corner of the blood-soaked pit.

“You really did it, underclassman…”

Ayaka slowly approached Motoharu, who had likewise not sustained any serious injuries. She crushed a centipede that was wriggling and squirming on the ground, its body halfway torn to pieces, underfoot. “You’re the one who did it! During the Calamity Arms Race, you inflicted quite a few injuries on Ayaka’s precious older brother, didn’t you? Tee-hee… I won’t forgive you. Let me give you your ‘reward’ now. Any last words?”

“Nn—”

“If not, then please die.” Ayaka spun the shotgun around and, with all her strength, smashed downward with the butt of the heavy weapon.

—*Crunch!*

The gun stock caved in the bridge of Motoharu’s nose.

“This is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this is for my brother, and this—” Ayaka struck him again and again.

Finally, she lowered the firearm. Motoharu moved no more; the middle of his face was a palette of gore. Ayaka nodded with satisfaction and resumed walking. She swung her arms and even skipped as she cheerfully traipsed through the Poison Hell.

“…………”

Busujima stared into the distance. His beloved pets had been slaughtered once again.

Casually, Ayaka arrived at the sixth obstacle, Antidote Candy, and calmly searched for candy among a pile of white powder. Since she was not poisoned, she had no reason to hurry.

“Wh-what a terrifying girl… Just as I would expect of darling Kyousuke’s younger sister…” Having finally regained her footing, Shamaya moved forward, dragging her wounded body onward.

“Ah…ah…” Abashiri, the male student from second-year Class B who had nearly been killed by Shamaya, also eventually rose and started to stagger forward.

Motoharu stayed where he had fallen.

“Fu… I finally made it back, shit. It’s seriously asking for trouble to piss off that bitch.—Wait, ooohhh! What’s that?! What happened?! What the hell went down while I was away from my seat… Heeey, Mr. Busujima? Busujimaaa, keep it tooogeeetheeer!!”

“Here’s the sash. I fought hard, right, big brother? Eh-heh-heh.”

“O-oh…”

Ayaka, whose face was covered in red, handed over the sash with a beaming smile. Kyousuke, who was the fourth runner for their class, accepted it, mouth twitching.

“Don’t kill anyone, and don’t get killed by anyone.” Although Ayaka had just barely managed to stay within the bounds of the graduation conditions Kurumiya had imposed on them, he still thought she had probably gotten a little carried away…

“Kyousuke Kamiya’s little sister, huh…? I will not fail to get my revenge on you. You must be prepared for that.”

“Tee-hee! But Ayaka will be sure to give you what’s coming to you, okay?”

A dangerous aura hung over Takamoto Yatsuzaki, the fourth runner for second-year Class A, but for now he ran off, prioritizing the match.

Ayaka had managed to secure first place—and there was surely no way that things would turn around at the last moment.

“Okay, leaving Mr. Busujima aside for the time being… Well, the first event of the afternoon, the Unhinged Obstacle Course, is in its final stages, and currently in top place is first-year Class A! Already they’ve handed the sash off to their anchor, Kyousuke Kamiya! The next group, third-year Class A, has just now finally finished with the Antidote Candy! Third-year Class B is having a little trouble with that obstacle. Meanwhile, second-year Class B has also arrived at the candy! Second-year Class A is still down and isn’t getting up! Could this be where they drop ooouuut?! And in last place, first-year Class B is still in the Dead Sea Pool. Sooo slooow!”

As Kurisu, who had returned to the MC booth, continued shouting, Kyousuke reached the seventh obstacle. Monkey Bars Minefield—at a glance they looked like ordinary monkey bars, but a large number of mines were buried in the ground, and if students lost their grips and fell, they would instantly go boom.

"……Okay."

He hesitated for several seconds, preparing himself. Then, Kyousuke leaped for the monkey bars with both hands. With about twenty yards to cross, he took the bars three at a time. Sweat oozed from his palms as he thought about the mines right below his feet, but he continued forward, being very careful not to slip.

"Bombs away, you fucking normie!"

"……Hmm?"

When Kyousuke had reached the halfway point, the combatant from third-year Class A arrived at the monkey bars. That male student, with black hair, black eyes, and a plain appearance, glared at Kyousuke with an antagonistic look. For some reason, he was holding a traffic cone in his hands.

"Surrounded by cute girls, flirting and making out day after day, it's a fucking slap in the face! I don't want to see you, I don't want to hear you, I don't want you to exist in this world, so die! Die a gruesome, outrageous death! Die-die-die-die, blow up and die! Blow up, you fucking normie!"

The boy clenched his teeth and stomped his feet in a fit of hysterics. Kyousuke didn't know him at all, but his rage seemed to be a little too intense and a little too focused for ordinary homicidal anger.

"No, wait! I don't even get what you're so upset about—"

"Explooooooode!"

In a fit of frothing rage, the shrieking newcomer threw the traffic cone. It soared toward the minefield, tracing an arc through the air before landing on the ground below Kyousuke's feet.

"Wha—?"

An ear-piercing roar rocked the festival grounds.

"Waaaaaahhh?!"

Kyousuke closed his eyes against the force of the blast as he was battered by hot wind and surrounded by a cloud of dust.

"Th-there it is—! The infamous jealousy of Takuo Yonekura, the Demon Bomber, has exploded onto the scene, and he's launched an assault on the ever-popular Kamiya! This guy is famous for blowing up couples attending holiday illuminations. He's known for hating anyone with a happy life! What an indiscriminate killer! He's the embodiment of jealousyyyyyy!"

"D-dangerous… What's with that guy? This is not good." Kyousuke had managed to quickly cover his ear with one hand and narrowly escape the brunt of the blast. Now he shuddered with fear.

Yonekura, meanwhile, had somehow managed to grow even more angry after missing with his first attack. Readying a bow and arrow he had apparently acquired during the Calamity Arms Race, he took aim at Kyousuke.

"Blow up and die, blow up, blow up, die, die, blow up, die-die-die-die-dieeeeeee!"

"Geh?!"

This is bad! Kyousuke, who was hanging from the monkey-bar rungs, was almost entirely defenseless. To make matters worse, there was a minefield below him. There was no way he would survive being shot by the bow.

"This time, for sure! Dieeeeee, yooouuu fucking normieeeeeeeee!"

"Tch—"

With his back to Yonekura, Kyousuke tried to cross the monkey bars as quickly as possible.

"Gugyah?!" Yonekura abruptly shouted.

"Stop your futile attack. There are those who you can kill and those you should not."

"……Wha?"

Kyousuke paused, turning to look at the voice behind him.

A male student fully kitted out in jet-black riot gear now held the bow and arrow in his hand. Yonekura lay at his feet, face crushed beneath black combat boots.

"That was close, wasn't it, Kyousuke? It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Takaya Kiriu. I serve as vice-chair to the Public Morals Committee. My job is to punish hoodlums like this." With a smile, Kiriu kicked Yonekura away.

"Gya?!" Yonekura grunted.

Kiriu threw the archery set in the opposite direction, away from Yonekura and toward the spectators' seats, then jumped up on the monkey bars. Still smiling, he quickly advanced on Kyousuke.

"Wha—?"

"Ha-ha, wait up!" Kiriu called to Kyousuke, who had begun to flee as fast as he could, hounded by an indescribable feeling of dread. "I don't mean you any harm!"

But Kyousuke did not stop. He remembered Takaya Kiriu, of third-year Class B. According to Kurumiya's list, his danger rank was A+.

Kiriu, called the Honorable Enforcer and Under Oath, lived by the maxim "Harm should befall those who do harm." He was a serial killer who had murdered six people who he had decided were "wicked."

He almost certainly did not have an especially high opinion of Kyousuke, who was supposed to have killed twelve people. Not to mention that they were in the middle of a match right now. Kyousuke had absolutely no inclination to wait around obediently.

"…Hmm? I wonder why you're running away. Could it be that you…that you're harboring some secret guilt?! I see—that must be why you run! You seemed like a virtuous underclassman, so I thought that you must have had some valid excuse, but apparently I was mistakeeen?! You crooked scoundrel, I shall punish you!"

"Huh?!"

Kiriu's narrowed eyes opened suddenly, and his posture completely changed. His gentle expression became angry, and he pursued Kyousuke with savage resolve.

"Waaaaaait!"

"No way!"

"Why not?! Do you fear judgment?!"

"I fear you! You're honestly pretty scary! Plus, I mean, we're in the middle of a match and everything—"

"That's no excuuuuuuse!"

"It's no good—you're not making any sense!"

As Kyousuke had expected, there was no reasoning with a killer who believed himself to be the sole source of absolute justice in the world. Mindful of his sweaty hands, Kyousuke made a careful but hasty escape across the Monkey Bars Minefield and onward to the next obstacle.

In his path, towering over everything, was the thirty-foot-tall Wall of Death. He leaped toward it, grabbed a rope, and started climbing, followed by a raucous cacophony.

"Reward good and punish evil! Suppress evil and elevate good! Violence against impurity and elevate purity! Waaaaaaiiit!"

"Explode the normie, kill the fucking normie, annihilate the goddamn motherfucking normieeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Kyaaa, Kyousuke! Kyousukeeeeee, I like you! I love youuu!"

Kiriu and the recently revived Yonekura had been joined by a female student in a purple *happi* coat—it was an upperclassman girl who had some time ago confessed her love to him behind the school building with a knife in her hand, saying, "Please go out with me!" Her amorous pursuit only enraged Yonekura further. All three were hot on his tail.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiit!"

"Eee?! If they catch me, I'm a dead man! I've got to get out of here…"

Fighting vertigo, Kyousuke cleared the top of the three-story-tall wall and began to descend the other side, taking care not to fall. Suddenly, a new spectacle caught his eye, making him doubt his senses.

"……?!"

Kyousuke could see the fourth competitor for first-year Class B, Renji Hikawa, tearing across the monkey bars.

This is bad, Kyousuke thought to himself and started to rush madly down the wall.

—The next moment, the world shook.

"Waaaaaahhh?! Wh-what the?!"

Boom, boom, booom!

The wall swayed but remained standing, and Kyousuke clung to the rope in confusion. The tremor, which was just like an earthquake, continued for about twenty seconds, before—

"……Huh?"

—Kyousuke suddenly found himself floating through a field of blue, body outstretched in the open air. Somewhere far away, Kurisu was shouting, but her furious broadcast did not reach his ears. Gradually, an object filled his vision: the twisted, broken Wall of Death, turned upside down, and—

"…………Kksshh."

An ivory-white gas mask, belonging to the person who had apparently *destroyed the wall with his terrible strength* and crossed to the other side.

"Wha—?"

Kyousuke scarcely had time to be astonished, as gravity suddenly gripped his body, dragging him earthward—he was still about two stories above the ground.

"Guh?!"

Kyousuke pulled himself into a crash position, lessening the considerable impact of his landing. He managed to haul himself up into a low crouch just in time to see the battered Wall of Death crash down in an immense cloud of dust, sending another earthquake reverberating across the festival grounds.

The fate of the other three competitors was uncertain. They had all been in the midst of climbing after Kyousuke, so they were likely now pinned under the collapsed wall. No groans or other noises were audible.

"……Awful."

"A-absurd……"

Kurisu had dropped her microphone, and Kyousuke was taken aback. The students who had been watching the match were also all bewildered, and the festival grounds were in an uproar.

"Run! Kyousuke, ruuuuuun!"

Eiri's urgent shout cut through the chaos just as Kyousuke's field of vision was suddenly darkened by an enormous shadow. Sensing a presence behind him, Kyousuke immediately rolled to the side. A hard fist hit the ground where his head had been just a moment before.

"Kuh—"

It was not over with just one attack. Left and right fists crashed down, one after another like a sudden rain, as Kyousuke frantically rolled away. Each and every strike was aimed at his head—the hail of blows was meant to utterly destroy him. Those fists had just a moment ago demolished an enormous wooden wall—a direct hit would surely crush his skull to dust. A shiver ran up Kyousuke's spine.

"…………"

In contrast, Renji was silent as always. There was no expression in his ivory-white gas mask, there was no emotion in his dispassionate movements, there was no mercy in his powerful fists. He was just like a machine…

"Shiiiiiiiiiiit! What?! What the hell is with that gas mask guuuuuuyyy?! He closed the gap to first place in an instant, buried the competition under a wall, and now he's even trying to kill the sole survivor, Kamiya! He's an ultra-grade monnnnnnnster! How can a creature like that possibly exist?! It's not fair, it's not fair; the gods must have made a mistake when they were handing out abilities?! Well, how are you going to get out of this one, Kamiya, with a monstrous opponent whose very existence defies all sanity?! Will you be killed in cold blood like all the other victims?!"

"Not if *I can help it*—!" Kyousuke yelled. Twisting his sand-covered body, he ducked, barely avoiding Renji's fist, and looked past his attacker. If this were a straightforward brawl in an open arena, he probably wouldn't stand a chance, but—

"Whoaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"…………?!"

Sliding under another punch, Kyousuke broke into a run. Slipping past the enormous obstacle in his way, he headed for the *goal.* He launched his body into the safety zone that awaited him just a few dozen yards ahead.

—*Baang!* Immediately after, the gunshot indicating the end of the match rang out.

"GOOOOOOOOOOAL! From first-year Class A, Kyousuke Kamiya escapes his gas mask–wearing assailant and narrowly makes it to the finish line! Athletic festival rules forbid violence outside of a match. Saved by the goal tape, Kamiya's first-year Class A takes the first victory of the afternoon! The gas mask guy who failed to kill him looks annoyed somehow!"

"…………Kksshh."

Staring at Kyousuke, who had rolled over the finish line, Renji let out a faint rush of exhaust. Straightening up, he walked toward Kyousuke, coming to a stop just a short distance away.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"……………………"

He looked down at Kyousuke, who was still trembling slightly, then abruptly turned his ivory-white gas mask away and passed by without saying anything.

X X X

And so Kyousuke and the other members of first-year Class A took the first victory of the afternoon matches. The pain continued, however, in the following events.

Explosion Tug-of-War forced two classes to compete over a field of landmines. 'Til Death Do Us Part was a three-legged race that shackled the teams together with manacles. And the Group Ball-Toss Rave saw the students raging to the explosive sounds of electro-core music, as if raving and ra●ing, as they enthusiastically played the ball-toss game…

In the three-legged race, Kyousuke and Ayaka were a sibling pair, Kitou and Kousaka were a GMK fanboy pair, and Shinji and Tomomi, resurrected from the infirmary, were a "romantic" pair. Though Class A fought hard in the three-legged race, both the tug-of-war and the ball-toss game, where numbers were everything, ended in defeat. They could do nothing to close the gap between their class and first-year Class B, which continued racking up points, much less the third-year classes.

And then they came to the fifth event of the afternoon—

"Okay, Crafty Cat, our victory depends on you!! If you lose, we won't forgive you! Got it?! Absolutely, absolutely, absoluuuuuutely win, please!"

"The reason why we lost the group games was because you killed off most of our teammates! If you fail now, we'll make sure that you're the one who dies next time!!

"Hey, clumsy giiirl! You'd seriously better not fail, okay?! Keep screwing up and we'll definitely lose! That would be, like, super-major lame! Get it, huh?!"

"……Oh no."

Maina held a piece of lumber close as she listened to her classmates' encouragement (and threats). Aside from Maina, twelve other students were on standby at the start line.

It was the long-distance race, the Thousand-Meter Slaughter Footrace.

Eiri was also competing for first-year Class A, while first-year Class B sent out Renko and Renji. Shamaya and Gosou, Kuroki and

Haruyo Gevaudan Tanaka, and several others filled out the lineup.

"Ohhhh dear…" In the middle of the front line, Maina was beginning to panic.

—It was understandable. Before the match started, Maina had been thoroughly admonished by Ayaka, Shinji, Tomomi, and the others, and even now they continued to pour on the pressure. Maina was already at her limit. On both sides—

"Fua-ha-ha! Finally you came out to play, huh?! Allow me to pay you back in full for what happened during the Seek-and-Destroy Challenge. Prepare yourself! Don't think that a miracle like that will save you twice, clumsy girl! This time, for sure, this time I will read you your last rites! Fua-ha-ha-ha!"

"……That's right."

Gosou arrogantly shouldered her double weapons, a wooden sword and wooden bat, and Kuroki twirled her *tonfa* around and around in both hands.

Caught between the two rank-A warriors—

"Ohhh gosh, ohhh no…"

Looking as though she was about to faint, Maina swayed left and right.

"…Miss Akabane. Is Miss Igarashi all right?"

"Of course she's not. *Sigh*…"

Shamaya and Eiri, who were in the very back row, looked at Maina with concern. Kyousuke was also praying for Maina's luck from the bleachers.

"Mic check, one, two, are you all set up, killers? Five laps around the track, it's the start of the longest battle royale at the athletic festival! Who will be left alive in the end? How many people? When the rest of the program is over, one of these classes will snatch victory from a desperate struggle to the death! So do whatever it takes to stay alive!"

"Killing will deduct points from your score, however. Well then, take your places! Get readyyy…"

—Bang!

"It's miiiiiiiiiiine!"

"……That's right!"

"You're done for. Ah-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha!"

The moment the race began, Gosou carved big arcs through the air with her two weapons, Kuroki swung her *tonfa*, Haruyo lashed out with her fists, and—

"Whoooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

—Maina fell over. Gosou's and Kuroki's weapons passed over the top of Maina's head, and—

"Gyah?!" "Ubwuh?!" "Guhaaa?!"

—hit the students standing behind her very hard. The victim of

Haruyo's Assassin's Fist spat up blood, and other students shrieked and cried out. As this was happening—

"Eee…eee, aiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

The mass murderer, instigator of the worst disasters, Black Pandora unleashed her fury. Maina had fallen flat in the middle of the very front row, lumber in hand, and a hurricane of violence was forming around her.

"Absurd?!" "……?!" "What happened?!"

"Whoooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Maina had fallen on the ground, and it seemed as though she would be swallowed up by the crowd of students following behind her, when suddenly—

It was as if a bomb had gone off. Some students were sent flying, while others were dragged into the melee, overtaken by Maina's bumbling cyclone. From the spectators' seats, Kyousuke and the other observers could scarcely tell what was happening.

They understood only one thing—

"Oh gosh! Oh nooo! Goodness graciouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuus!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

Maina had snapped, right at the start of the race, and was now drawing everyone around her into the chaos.

Watching the massacre, Ayaka clenched her fists. "That's it, Crafty Cat!" she cheered. "Go, go, go! Get 'em, get 'em allllll!"

"Heh-heh-heh. The 'Pressure Maina Until She Snaps and Slaughters Everyone' strategy seems to be a splendid success. My goodness, watching from the sidelines is really fun!"

"Kya-ha-ha! It's great, like super great! The upperclassmen are totally panicking! Good job, clumsy girl, kill 'em, kill 'em! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Oh nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Everyone who didn't know to avoid the disaster area surrounding Maina was being helplessly tossed about.

Taking a detour around the mosh pit of violence, Eiri grumbled, "…Awful."

Shamaya, looking pale, also gave the Maina-melee a wide berth as she moved ahead. "Indeed, how terribly vulgar…"

"…*Kksshh*. Dangerous, dangerous. Well, if you aren't in perfect form, Maina. Let's stay in the top spot, Renji, and jump over her once we've gone around again."

"…………"

Holding Renko in his arms, Renji, who had leaped clear over the other students' heads from his starting position at the very back of the pack, silently nodded in assent.

Aside from Eiri, Shamaya, Renko, and Renji, the competitors were still stuck at the starting line, and more than half had already fallen. Gosou and Kuroki, who had started right next to Maina, had both collapsed, bleeding from their heads. It seemed like only a matter of time before the other students would join them in a crushing defeat.

However—

“Interesting. Interesting, little girl! Kyousuke, and the gas masks, and you… Really, this year’s first-years are a bunch of strong fighters, a bunch of skilled killers, it gives me a thrill!”

“……Ah?”

A fluffy costumed arm easily deflected a wayward blow from the piece of lumber. Then, just as Maina was regaining her senses, another plush fist lashed out at her face.

“Ah-cha!”

“Waah?! Ah—aiii?!”

Blood sprayed from Maina’s nose as Haruyo’s punch connected, laying her out flat. From the ground, Maina looked up with wide eyes at the Costumed Killer looming over her.

“Oh-ho-ho! Well then, are you going to let me have some fun? I’ll tell you now, blunt weapons won’t be much use on this fluffy body of mine! I can relish every blow and bathe in a fountain of blood!”

“Ah, aaaaaa…”

“Maina?!”

Eiri began retracing her course, rushing to come to Maina’s rescue.

“Wait right there!” Shamaya blocked her path. “I will be your opponent, Miss Akabane! Both you and Miss Igarashi have caused me quite some trouble. This is where you make your exit!”

“…Tch. You’re really annoying!” Eiri blew a raspberry and took up a combat stance.

Shamaya laughed—“Oh-ho-ho!”—and reached for something hidden inside her long white coat. Licking her lips, she spoke strangely. “We Public Morals Committee members each have a deadly weapon that we are permitted to carry…and mine has not yet been unveiled at the athletic festival, has it? Miss Kuroki has her batons, Miss Gosou has her wooden sword, and I have—”

Her emerald eyes blazing, Shamaya pulled out her special weapon.

“A ●●●●●!”

The weapon she hoisted high in the air was long, and thin, and pink…

…a so-called *adult toy*.

““““

One way or another, Haruyo's first attack was still the only one that had hit. On the other hand—

"Gyaaaaaahhh?!" "Uwah?! Hey, don't come over he—hyeee?!" "Gbwuh?!" "Hgeee?!" "R-run—bgyoeh?!"

—The other students, swept up in the turbulence of Maina's frantic flight and Haruyo's furious pursuit, suffered considerable collateral damage. Anyone too slow to escape the area of the twin storms, including the students who had been pulled down and trampled at the start of the race, was tossed about like a ship in a fierce hurricane, battered again and again.

"Heey, stubborn girl!"

"Buh?!"

Haruyo's furious attack didn't even come close to hitting her target, and she instead dealt a backhand blow to a nearby male student. As he tumbled to the ground, she grabbed him by the heel and, wielding his body like a weapon, swung him through the air.

"Uh, uwaaaaaahhh—gah?!" "Gyah?!"

The unfortunate boy's body passed by Mania and crashed into the face of another female student who was just getting back on her feet. When the girl fell again, Haruyo grabbed her by the leg and furiously rushed after Maina with her new weapon.

"Try this on for size, fwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Hwuh?!"

"Gyan?!"

And, at last, the back of the female student's head connected with the side of Maina's face. Maina was knocked off her feet, eyes spinning, and sprawled out feebly on the ground.

"Ow-ow-ow…"

Tossing aside the pair of weaponized students, Haruyo laughed and approached Maina. "Oh-ho-ho, I've finally got you, little girl! Well then, shall I finish you off?"

"Ghuh—!"

Looking down at the trembling girl, Haruyo raised a fluffy costumed arm. Renji ran past, just to the side of her. Renko did not stop to help; for now, she was one of the enemies.

"Maina! Wait, I'm coming now to help you, so—" "An opening, *mon Dieeeuuu*!" "Hyaaaaaahhh?!" "Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…"

This time, Shamaya leaped at Eiri, who was trying to dash over to help, and dragged her down. Eiri grabbed Shamaya's wrists, refusing to surrender, even as she turned her face away from the drool dangling from her assailant's lips.

Both Maina and Eiri were in desperate predicaments.

"W-waaa…waaahh."

"Oh-ho. You fought well. However, it looks like you are still below me, doesn't it? I do praise your honest efforts and will at least try to send you off without suffering. Sacred Friendship-Destroying Slaughter Fist! Ah-cha—"

"Uh…uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

The instant that Haruyo lashed out with her deadly Assassin's Fist, Maina leaped to her feet, shouting a battle cry as she launched a savage counterattack.

"What?!"

Risking everything, Maina threw her arms around Haruyo in a surprise tackle.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Nooooooooo!"

Unprepared for Maina's sudden assault, Haruyo frantically lost her balance and went sprawling.

"Guh…gnnh, you just don't know when to give up, do you?! It's a useless struggle—"

""""Aaa?!""""

"—Ah?"

Maina was befuddled, and Kurisu was befuddled, and the students who had been watching their battle were befuddled, and finally Haruyo was befuddled.

Ever so slowly, Haruyo looked around her surroundings, and her eyes—her *round, cute, reddish-brown eyes* grew wide. Patting her face in confusion, she looked off toward the edge of the competition grounds.

Sitting there was a freshly severed head—it had popped off when she fell, and rolled away. It was *the head of her* kigurumi *costume.*

"………………Ah."

Haruyo froze.

Her gaze shifted from the *kigurumi* head back to the students who were staring at her bare face. "F-fah…faaa-aaaaa-aa-a-aa-aa…" She began to tremble. Her pale complexion flushed red in the blink of an eye, and her spasms quickly grew violent.

"—Dead meat." Abruptly, her shaking calmed, and Haruyo began muttering. "Dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat, dead meat —"

Turning her head to look at each and every person who was staring at her, Haruyo announced her murderous intent. Finally she pointed at Maina and, in a voice thick with resentment, declared, "Dead meat."

“Kyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” With a strange scream, Haruyo leaped up.

Maina, who had been straddling her, was sent sprawling. “Hwah?!”

The third-year students began to scream, and Kurisu shouted into the microphone. *“Oh shiiiiiit, Haruyo’s entered berserk mode! Run away!* Everyone who laid eyes on her bare face, *run awaaaaaay, or every single one of you will die!!”*

“Kyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Haruyo, who continued emitting the same strange scream, hopped up and down, recklessly swinging her arms and legs and shaking her head as though she’d gone mad. Her bright red face was warped with rage, and her eyes spun around in their sockets.

“D-dead embarrassing…… ”

—Whabammm!

Abruptly, Haruyo collapsed. Crashing to the ground, she did not so much as twitch.

“……Eh? U-um…m-maybe we’re saved…?” Kurisu, who had tossed aside the microphone during her retreat, nervously looked back toward the festival grounds.

Busujima, who was relaxing in the broadcasting booth, smiled bitterly. *“My, my. It looks like the shock of so many people seeing her bare face caused her to faint… You see, she’s a very sensitive girl, Miss Haruyo.”*

X X X

Maina’s impressive showing had cut down the strength of the other classes, and first-year Class A had been able to score some points during the last race, but the situation still looked dire.

The final event, the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl, was to be held between the two classes with the highest scores. That left two regular matches remaining: the Eight-Hundred-Meter Pandemonium Relay and—

“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here, it’s fiiiiiinally here! The only event at the athletic festival involving faculty participation, also known as the Captivating Teacher Costume Contest! The rules are very simple. The homeroom teacher for each class will wear a costume incorporating their respective class’s colors and put on a performance! Our panel of five judges

will evaluate the contents of the performance, awarding up to twenty points! At the end of this generous match, on top of the points scored by each class during the event, the current score of the victorious class will be doubled! Now, let's meet our judges for today!"

Kurisu pointed to five people who were lined up next to the broadcasting booth. They were visitors wearing a *Noh* mask, a wolf mask, a *tengu* mask, a "Jason" mask, and a horse head mask.

"Yes, for various reasons, we have asked them all to cover their faces, but every one of them is a special guest deeply connected to this academy. Take care not to be rude to them."

"……Um."

"I know. Don't tell everyone…"

Checking Kyousuke before he could say something, Eiri wore a complicated expression. Among the five judges, the person wearing the *Noh* mask had white hair and wore a white funeral robe and red haori—Kyousuke was sure he recognized the woman. In one hand she held a video camera, and its lens had been pointed at them the whole time.

Eiri cast her eyes down in embarrassment and muttered quietly to herself. "Why are you here, Mother…? G-geez!"

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And so the curtain rose on the Captivating Teacher Costume Contest.

By the results of an impartial lottery, Kyousuke's class was to present last. Starting off the event, the first presentation came from third-year Class A's Mihiro Mizuchi. Showcasing a pure white nurse's outfit, Mizuchi used her special weapon, a pistol specially made to look like a syringe, to present a splendid "gun show." Starting off strong, she nailed a high score of eighteen points.

Next was second-year Class B, Shidou Muguruma. In a purple school uniform, he gave a dance performance involving *taiko* drums. Second-year Class A's Dahlia Barazono was costumed like a visual-kei vocalist and gave a short live performance. Neither class was able to score more than fifteen points; third-year Class A remained in the lead.

When it came to third-year Class B, however, their old teacher, Greyman, shuffled about moaning "Ohh, ohh" in a pointlessly realistic zombie costume… He put on a surreal masquerade and scored an unexpected five points.

Facing the ranking order of third-year Class A, second-year Class A, second-year Class B, and then third-year Class B, the fifth class—

“Heh-heh. Okay, okay, my turn, right?”

Appearing from the changing booth was first-year Class B’s temporary homeroom teacher, Reiko Hikawa. She wore her usual white lab coat. However, she held the front of it tightly closed from top to bottom with both hands. It looked as though she was wearing her costume underneath.

“All right, everyone, this image should certainly imprint itself onto your eyeballs…and also bewitch you!”

Wearing a bold smile, Reiko opened her white lab coat, then threw it off with a great flourish—revealing a dark blue *school swimsuit.*

Made of extremely thin material, it was an article of clothing meant to be worn by partially developed elementary and middle school girls. Now, however, it covered the body of a mature adult woman of *particularly notable* development.

J cups. She had forcibly shoved her large bust, easily several times over what a normal elementary or middle school student would possess, into an off-the-shelf swimsuit—the thin fabric was pulled even thinner, and the name tag reading Reiko on her chest was warped and distorted. The ill-fitting front and sides of the suit exposed her ample bosoms.

““““…………””””

The grounds fell silent in the presence of such overwhelming majesty.

The life went out of the eyes of Eiri, Ayaka, Kurisu, and the other mostly underdeveloped girls, while the boys’ eyes sparkled lustily. A few were practically moved to tears.

Reiko’s rack was peerless, and she wasn’t finished yet.

“Okaaay! Well then, I’ll get started on my exerciseees!”

Reiko started doing Purgatory-Style Warm-Up Exercises. Her body moved aggressively along to the progressive metal background music. Emphasizing her chest, waist, hips, and butt, the exercises seemed perversely seductive when performed by a woman with such bountiful proportions.

“One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!”

She did exercises where she swung her arms and bent and stretched her legs, exercises where she moved her hips back and forth, exercises where she wrote the letters Ren with her butt, exercises where she bent her body then whipped her hair straight back… Before she had finished, Reiko held everyone’s captive gazes—particularly when she did the exercises where she jumped up and down on both legs:

“Uhhyuuuh!” “Amazing shaking!” “Boing-boing-boing!” “The titty gods are going wild!” “Calm down.” “You calm down, stupid boy!” “Ohh…” “Boom-boom-boom!” “I want to bury my face in them.” “They haven’t fallen out yet?! Ah, amazing!” “Hey, somebody bring me my binoculars!” “Boobies! Boobies!” and so on.

The crowd erupted into excited cheering and revelry. It didn’t matter that they were first-year Class B’s rivals. All the boys at the event grounds stood in groups and applauded, showering praise on Reiko.

“Yaaaaaayyy! It’s a blessing, a blessing…”

In the cheering section for first-year Class A, Oonogi and Usami were both prostrating themselves, praying before Reiko’s mighty breasts.

However, in contrast to the wild enthusiasm of the male students —

“……She’s better off dead.”

“That’s right. They’re all better off dead, bunch of trash.”

—most of the female students were looking down on the male students with cold eyes.

Kyousuke, meanwhile, was still sitting quietly in his seat. He was standing up in a different way and, feeling it was best not to expose his enthusiasm, decided to remain where he was.

Eventually—

“*Haaah, haaah…haaah*…I-I’m exhausted…phew…!”

Reiko, dripping with sweat, sank down to the ground, finished with her performance. Purgatory-Style Warm-Up Exercises went from level one to level seven, gradually increasing in intensity with each step.

Reiko had gone up to level three, but even so, she appeared completely spent. Staring up at the sky with unfocused eyes, breathing hard, Reiko looked as if she had just finished a different, *particularly vigorous* activity.

As she continued to excite the males, the judges presented her score…

“Ehhh?! Six-sixteen?! No waaaaaay?!”

Taken aback by the unexpectedly low total, Reiko shouted hysterically. When she looked, four out of the five judges—the four men—had all given her full marks, while the last person—the woman wearing the *Noh* mask—had given her a zero.

“But why?!” she protested.

The woman gave her a brief, nonchalant answer. "…No reason, really. I'm just acting on behalf of all the girls' feelings, you see?"

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"HA-HA-HA! She tried too hard to be popular with the guys, and her enormous breasts turned into suicide bombs! Blunt seduction is no good for being popular with girls, stupid, stupid, stuuupid, HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

"…I see. So it was the jealousy of those who are lacking."

While the female students showered the female judge with applause and admiration and booed Busujima, first-year Class A's turn came.

Eiri and the other girls had decided on the details of the costume, so Kyousuke and the boys in the class had no idea what kind of cosplay Kurumiya was going to present. Changing booths were lined up on the grounds, and everyone eagerly looked to the one on the far right, with the only curtain that remained closed.

Their first prediction was that she would be in S&M gear. Or maybe a demonic military uniform…

Kyousuke and the rest of first-year Class A were now in fourth place overall. If they couldn't take victory in this event, the possibility of them advancing to the final event, the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl, would all but disappear. Kurumiya herself was surely taking this very seriously, and the students were genuinely looking forward to seeing just what kind of costume their teacher would wear.

"Well, we've seen some truly impressive displays so far, but at long last we come to the final entry! Capping it off for us is first-year Class A, Miss Hijiri Kurumiya! The year before last, she made her students dress up as lions and pretended to be a lion tamer, and last year she acted out the part of an S&M queen in bondage gear, so what kind of performance will we see this yeeeaaar?! For a secret masochist like me, her costume is sure to be the most intriguing!"

"Huh. Well then, Miss Kurumiya, come on out!"

"…………"

"……"

"…"

"Hmm?" Busujima looked bewildered as Kurumiya did not appear, no matter how much time passed. After giving Kurisu a confused look, he yelled, "*Heeey, Miss Kurumiya, what's wrong? Each contestant is allotted a total of five minutes, and yours have already started. If you stay in there and don't come out, you'll score zero—*"

"Shut the fuck up and don't rush me, pencil dick! I also have to prepare myself mentally…,” Kurumiya shouted back. Then—“Ohh, I’ll just kill you!” she roared as the curtain opened violently.

Kurumiya’s costume was finally revealed—

“D-damn it… I won’t forget this humiliation!”

A red *gothic Lolita outfit.*

The poofy skirt had a pannier under it, and if that wasn’t enough, it was edged with frills. Her narrow waist was bound by a corset, and both of her shoulders were puffed up like flower buds. Large bows sat atop her head.

““““

stop saying those things. If you don’t…I’ll cry… Sweetie Hijiri will cry! Waaaaaa…”

Reiko stared at her good friend, her eyes so wide they looked as if they might fall out. “…‘Sweeti…ri’…?”

Adopting a coaxing tone, Kurumiya made her sweet, childish voice sound even sweeter as she continued, “Mm-hmm… This is all for the sake of winning. In order for my class to win a real victory at the athletic festival, I’m trying my very best. And so, everyone…please give us victory! Please give victory to sweet Hijiri and her friends in first-year Class A—I’m asking you. Pweease! …Ah, I fumbled it.”

Laughing with embarrassment and sticking out her tongue, Kurumiya knocked herself on the head.

The scene was enough to make anyone doubt their own sanity.

Busujima, looking dazed, asked timidly, “*U-ummm… Is this your performance, Miss Kurumiya?*”

“Yeah, that’s right! Can’t you tell by looking, you son of a bitch? I’ll stick my iron pipe up your ass and churn up your intestines! I’ll. Put. You. To. Death. ♥” She was not doing a very good job staying in character.

Behind her sweet facial expression, one could sense Kurumiya’s roiling bloodlust—Busujima, himself an elite killer, shuddered with fear and made a hurried announcement.

“O-okay! W-well then… Um, judges, give your scores!”

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“You bastards have to win. If you don’t, I’ll kill you.”

Sitting on the sofa in the spectators’ seats, holding her knees to her chest, Kurumiya addressed them in a hollow voice. She was still wearing the Lolita dress, as if she had not even had the energy to change.

Eiri, who had been the one in charge of making her costume (she was no good at cooking, but apparently sewing was her specialty), played with the ends of her hair. “…Sure, sure. But it really does suit you, Miss Sweetiri!”

“She’s right, she’s right—you were super cute!”

“Yeah, yeah, that was really clever. So clever we got the full twenty points!”

“Hey, hey! You guys, on top of that—”

“Gaaaaaaaaahhh!” Kurumiya couldn’t take it anymore and went crazy, tearing at her hair with both hands. “I’ll kill you! Listen here, assholes… I won’t forgive you if you lose after putting me through this, you hear?! Win! No matter what happens, you win this thing. That is all.”

And so Kurumiya buried her face in her lap in silence.

Still, at present the scoreboard was—

Third-year Class A	281 points
Third-year Class B	265 points
Second-year Class A	221 points

Second-year Class B	217 points
First-year Class A	270 points
First-year Class B	308 points

First-year Class A was in third place out of the six classes, thanks to Kurumiya scoring a perfect twenty points in the Captivating Teacher Costume Contest and moving them up a spot.

Since the two classes with the highest score would participate in the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl, they needed to advance one more rank in the final event to even have a chance at overall victory. For this reason, they could not afford to lose the next relay race.

Eiri, Shinji, Maina, Kyousuke—their classmates sent off four competitors to this most crucially important match.

"Do your best, big brother! Everyone else, you do your best, too… especially you, Crafty Cat."

"Our fate is in your hands. We'll really be cheering for you! Never surrender, even if it costs you your lives!"

"Oh yeah, you gotta get us ragin' out in the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl!!"

"H-hee-hee… Please kill to your hearts' content… H-hee-hee-hee."

"I don't really mind if you lose! I'm lookin' forward to my Kurumiya's punishment when she goes totally berserk! Ah, but also to the prize that I get when we win—"

And so on. Surrounded by the voices of their comrades, the team left the bleachers, heading for the entry gate. Kyousuke and the others were quiet. Eiri let out a yawn: "…*Fwah.*" Shinji, who had opposed adding Maina to the team right up until the last second, wore a sullen expression on his bandage-covered face. Maina mumbled to herself, repeating, "Can't let it happen, can't let it happen, can't let it happen…"

Kyousuke—

"……Kyousuke."

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Eiri pulled at the sleeve of his gym uniform. She quickly brought her face close to his. He raised his eyebrows curiously.

"—Hey, do you want to win?"

"Huh?"

Anyone else would have said, "How can you ask me that at this point?" but Kyousuke paused. Eiri's question had hit on the very issue that Kyousuke had been mulling over.

Currently in first place was first-year Class B. The way things were going, Kyousuke's class was truly likely to lose. They would lose—and he would be separated from Renko.

He remembered Reiko's words: "If you don't want to be separated from my daughter, you'd better try your hardest. *But if you do want to be separated, then just don't try at all.* Heh-heh. You're free to choose whichever option you like—"

"……What are you saying? Of course I want to win." Shaking off the doubt that had been weighing him down, Kyousuke smiled bitterly. "We've come this far—we can't lose now. We have to win, for everyone who worked so hard, and for Kurumiya."

"……I see." Eiri turned away, seeming just a little displeased. "That's right, isn't it? No one would want to make a half-assed finish…*sigh*. I understand. In that case, I'll also make a serious effort… though reluctantly, on my part." She looked back at him with scornful, troubled eyes. "Let's win, Kyousuke—for Renko's sake."

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"HELL YEEEEEEEEEEAH! Our mental monumental hell-coaster of an athletic festival finally comes down to this! Which classes, their hands filthy with sweat and dust and blood, will be able to grab hold of a ticket to the final event?! For some of you, this will be your last battle, so kill to your hearts' content, you fuckin' motherfuckers!"

There was palpable excitement in the clear autumn sky. In front of Kurisu, who was as enthusiastic as ever, the first runners for each team were lined up on the white starting line.

Lane 1 Chihiro Andou (First-year Class B) Rank: C+
Lane 2 Anji Gosou (Third-year Class A) Rank: A
Lane 3 Eiri Akabane (First-year Class A)
Lane 4 Mei Kuroki (Third-year Class B) Rank: A+
Lane 5 Ronaldo Gacey (Second-year Class A) Rank: B
Lane 6 Sou Takei (Second-year Class B) Rank: B+

Each competitor at the front gripped batons in their class colors.

Passing these batons between four people, each team would go around the track four times, with points assigned based on the position of the final runner. First place would get fifty points, second place forty points, third place thirty points—fourth place *minus* thirty points, fifth place minus forty points, sixth place minus fifty points, and minus one hundred points for being eliminated or disqualified.

Since there was currently a difference of less than one hundred points between the first-place and last-place class, it was entirely possible that the results of the Eight-Hundred-Meter Pandemonium Relay could cause a major upset.

“Heh-heh-heh, I’ll finally get to enact the revenge I’ve been waiting for!”

“……That’s right.”

“This time I’m gonna eat ’em… I’ll bite off a bit for you!”

“Let’s turn them all into patties!”

“Oh, these guys? They’re nothing but chaff. That girl with red hair is going to yawn soon, like, ‘…*Fwah.*’ Seizing that opportunity, I’ll *craaack* her skinny waist over my knee.”

“…………”

As the other runners were psyching themselves up, Eiri was silent, arms folded, eyes closed.

The male student in a *happi* coat was at his wits’ end. “Yawn already!”

Finally, they were instructed to take their starting positions, and Eiri opened her eyes. They were sharp and filled with a new light. And then—

Bang!

The instant that the starting signal sounded, Eiri’s body *disappeared.*

“……?!”

Gosou’s and Kuroki’s batons struck in vain, hitting an empty dust cloud, as they staggered off the starting line. Eiri had already flown off alone and was approaching the first turn.

“What the hell?! Sh-she’s fast—”

“……Too fast, huh!”

As Gosou and Kuroki stood marveling at Eiri, the remaining three contestants took off. There was Chihiro, who ran along the inside of the track, drool fluttering from her lips, and—

“Luu. Luu. Laaa. ♪”

—Ronaldo, attacking from the outside of the track.

“How to defeat a cannibal clown? It’s simple! First, snatch the afro right off—”

“Ronaldo magic hunt. ♪”

“Whaaat?!”

Takei tried to attack the clown from the far side, but Ronaldo dodged the attack using his strange technique. The next moment, he moved fast enough to leave a trailing afterimage and appeared not in Takei’s path but in Chihiro’s. He cheered as he spun.

“Luu. Luu—”

“Nom.”

“Laaaaaa?!”

Chihiro bit down on the nape of Ronaldo’s neck, interrupting his roundhouse kick. Then, with all the strength in her neck and jaw, she bit off a big chunk of meat. Ronaldo collapsed, blood gushing from his neck.

"Wah?! Stupid roadblock—whoooa?!" Gosou, who had been right behind Ronaldo, tripped over his body and went sprawling.

Jumping over Gosou and Ronaldo, Kuroki overtook Chihiro, who was eating her meat as she ran. "…Lacking in flavor. But the texture's not bad…*nom-nom.*" Slipping past Takei's attack, Kuroki sprung into second place. On the other hand, Eiri was—

"So faaast, what is her deal?! First-year Class A suddenly has a huge lead! She's nearly half a lap ahead?! Third-year Class B is desperately chasing her but can't close the gap! What the hell is with that speed?! Don't tell me that amateur's been holding back all this time… Actually, that would be just like her."

"I don't understand? She did nothing but yawn before."

While the broadcasting continued, Eiri rounded the fourth turn and came back to the start. Kuroki, in second place, had just passed the hundred-meter mark, and the last-place team was finally coming around the second turn.

"Y-you…first yeaaar! B-bad…this is bad, too bad… If this keeps up…Saki will kill me—"

"What are you dawdling for, Miss Gosou?!" Shamaya yelled, lividly waiting for her turn to race. "Do you want me to beat you within an inch of your life yet again?!"

Gosou was being chased down by Ronaldo, who held his bleeding neck as he ran. "Hyoe?!" She panicked, tripped, and toppled over, her feet tangled up on themselves.

From the cheering section for third-year Class A came a chorus of loud booing: "Die!"

"Oh, dear me, that poor upperclassman…" Maina felt as if she was watching her own future in Gosou's tragedy.

Beside her, Eiri passed the baton to Shinji. "Here, Shinji the Super Creep! Don't you dare get caught, no matter what it takes!!"

"Yes, of course. I shall pull even farther ahead!"

Shinji, the second runner for first-year Class A, bounded away enthusiastically. He hadn't put up much of a showing before, but his speed (at running away) was impressive.

"If I play an important role in our victory, I ought to get more popular with the girls! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!" Running splendidly, spurred on by his questionable ulterior motive, Shinji widened the gap between first and second place.

"Ah…aaah…" Bouncing eagerly on the start line, Amon Abashiri, from third-year Class B, received the baton from Kuroki, in second place.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” Instantly, Abashiri screamed. Shoving the baton into his belt, he dropped to all fours. “Your faaaaaaaaaaaace! Give it to meeeeeeeee, give me your faaaaaaaaaaaace!” With tremendous speed, he started the chase.

“Eeek?!” Unable to help himself, Shinji looked back at his hideous pursuer, and his delicate features twisted into a frightful grimace.

Faceless Amon Abashiri. When his face was destroyed by burns, he had gained a strange and tenacious fixation. Whenever he saw a beautiful face—especially on a handsome boy his age—he was overcome by the desire to tear it off and seemed to lose all control.

The distance between the two, which had been nearly half a lap, gradually closed… And that wasn’t all.

“Here I gooo, okaaay!”

Taking the baton from Chihiro, Bob, living up to her superhuman potential, began to quickly shorten the distance to other runners.

“Gbuh?! S-Saki…stop…gahh?! S-sorry…gehh?! Forgive…gueh?! P-please forgive…buhh?! Please forgive meeeeee?!” Gosou, who had finished handing over her baton in last place, had become Shamaya’s punching bag.

Fearing the wrath of the Murder Princess, the other runners desperately picked up the pace and left Gosou where she had fallen in the dust.

“The deranged Abashiri Amon from third-year Class B and the flour-sack girl from first-year Class B are roaring ahead even as they try to take each other out! Will first-year Class A be able to escape?! This has gotten interesting, yeeeah!”

“Oh dear, oh gosh…oh no, oh…” Watching the race come to a climax, Maina was growing more and more nervous as she awaited her turn. She shivered and trembled violently, eyes darting back and forth.

Waiting with her on the start line was—

“…………”

Of all people, it was Renji Hikawa. The monster wearing the ivory-white gas mask radiated an overwhelmingly frightful presence as he stood there stoically.

“Maina!”

Shinji had made it back to the start. Though terrified by the threat of Abashiri, he had neither wavered nor slowed down, and Bob had helped him out with a surprise attack against his pursuer. When he handed over the baton, first-year Class A was still in the lead.

“You take it from here!”

“Eeek?!”

Maina gripped the baton with a trembling hand and ran off, her feet slapping against the track.

“Do your best, Maina! Come oooooon!”

“Mainaaaaaa! Make the most of the head start they gave you—”

“Faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaace!”

“Gyah?!”

Passing off his own baton, Abashiri leaped at Shinji, clawing at his face as he pushed him to the ground. Moments later, Bob also passed her baton forward to Renji—

The monster awakened.

“…………!”

His legs, wrapped in thick, sinewy muscle, pushed against the ground like firing pistons, and he instantly accelerated. With explosive leg strength, he rapidly overtook the male student from third-year Class B.

“Ee, ee, eeeeee!”

Renji steadily closed in on Maina, who was still running in first place.

“Hwaaah?!” Noticing Renji’s pursuit, Maina’s eyes went wide, and in her panic she tried to run even faster.

—Her fear proved fatal.

““““Ah?!””””

As she passed the second turn and entered the straightaway, Maina’s feet slipped, and she lost her balance.

Since Renji was still about twenty meters behind, if she fell here, no one would get caught up in the disaster—it would be nothing but an ordinary tragedy. Their lead would close, and Kyousuke and the others in first-year Class A would fall from their first-place position…

“Ah—” Despair welled up in Maina’s eyes. Time seemed to pass extremely slowly as everyone looked on in anguish. Maina bit her lip.

“Whoooaaa?!”

As expected, Maina fell down. Tumbling loudly across the ground, she screamed as a cloud of dust billowed up around her.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Still moving with the momentum of her fall, Maina rolled forward and came up on her feet in a defensive pose. Immediately, she started running again, like nothing had even happened.

““““Huh?!””””

The gallery was astonished at Maina’s truly unexpected recovery.

Her whole body was now covered in dust, but despite her fall, Maina put all her might into pumping her arms and legs. Her flax-colored eyes burned with the powerful light of her intense focus.

“Ohh, that’s great, Igarashi! Keep it up! Don’t get caught!!”

“Come on, Crafty Cat, that’s it! Come oooooon!”

“Go for it, clumsy girl! Don’t lose, clumsy girl! Go, go, goooooo!”

““““Go for iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!””””

“*Haah*, okaaaaaay!”

As her classmates cheered her on, Maina accelerated. Trying to stay ahead of Renji, who was rapidly drawing nearer, she went into a trance and ran at full speed. Fifteen meters, fourteen meters, thirteen meters… The distance between the two gradually closed…

“Maina!”

With just five meters separating her from Renji, Maina made it back to the starting line, where Kyousuke waited with an outstretched hand. Maina’s face relaxed, her desperate effort almost at an end—

“Kyo-Kyousuke…!”

His grip closed around the tip of the baton—

“Aiii?!”

Before she could finish the handoff, Maina tripped over her own feet. The baton sailed through the air as she stumbled and fell.

“Whoooooaaa?!”

“Crafty Cat?!” “Clumsy girl?!” “I’ll kill yooouuu!”

“Shit—”

Renji was right on top of them now. Kyousuke frantically scrambled to pick up the baton that had slipped from Maina’s hands—

“Oh no, sorry! My foot slipped!”

“Guh?!”

Renko, who was also the fourth runner for her team, took her baton from Renji and immediately smashed the tip of her foot into Kyousuke’s chin, sending him sprawling. She looked down at him and laughed through her gas mask, “*Kksshh.*”

“R-Renko—”

…*Why?*

Renko quickly ran off, leaving Kyousuke behind in a daze. Surpassing first-year Class A, which had fumbled the baton pass, her class jumped from second place to first.

“So, so-so-so-so—sowwy! Kyousuke, hurry!” Maina thrust out the recovered baton and urged Kyousuke forward.

“……?! O-oh!” Regaining his senses, Kyousuke took the baton—for sure, this time—and started running. Renko had only just entered the first turn. At this distance, he could catch her soon—

“Justice!”

Suddenly sensing danger behind him, Kyousuke promptly jumped to the side. A black baton grazed his cheek.

"Prepare yourself, Kyousuke Kamiya! You shall be judged in accordance with the laws of absolute justice!"

"Geh?!" Kyousuke dodged a sudden stun gun attack and countered with a backhand blow. "Takaya… Kiriu…!"

"Ha-ha! Justice will not rest until it knows victory!"

Evading Kyousuke's punch, Kiriu smiled and opened his narrow eyes wide. Tightly grasping a stun gun in his right hand and a steel baton in his left, Under Oath came after him.

Kyousuke staved off Kiriu's fierce attacks as he ran. "Damn it, don't get in my way! Persistent bastard!"

The baton was trouble, but Kyousuke was really worried about the stun gun. He didn't know what voltage it was set on, but if it connected, it would probably be all over for him. *Better to take him on directly than continue running away*, Kyousuke decided. He turned to confront Kiriu.

"Heh-heh… Seems fun, upperclassman! I also want to get in on this!"

A male student in a pink jumpsuit and skull scarf chased them in pursuit, hot on their heels, clutching a deadly *shamshir* sword. Leaning forward, he closed the distance between them, so close to the ground that it looked almost as if he was crawling.

"So shall I hunt you down?" He swung the *shamshir*. Its blade grazed the top of Kyousuke's shoulder.

"Just a… Why is there a Ripper Jack here?!"

"Yo, I'm the oldest brother, Takamoto. I'm going to take your limbs and head back to my younger brothers as souvenirs."

"Tch—" Just as Kyousuke narrowly avoided being cleaved in two by Takamoto's relentless attacks—

"Justice!"

—Kiriu attacked again with the stun gun.

Crack!

A flash burst in the corner of Kyousuke's vision. "Mr. Kiriu, are you joking? You call that justice?! Only going after me—"

"There's no use in arguing about it! After I take you down, I'll shoot Takamoto, too!"

"You're first, Kamiya Kyousuke… I'm much obliged to your little sister, hmm?"

Kiriu waved his baton and stun gun, while Takamoto flashed his *shamshir*. Rather than attack one another, they cooperated, launching a concentrated assault on Kyousuke alone.

Kyousuke grew flustered as the distance between him and Renko grew.

"Aaalll rrriiight!! Two upperclassmen are attacking first-year Class A's Kyousuke Kamiya from either side! Are they planning to cut off his escape and utterly destroy himmmmmm?! Even Kamiya can't withstand this! And first-year Class B is taking this chance to gain some distance on all the others! Meanwhile, trailing behind, second-year Class B is also—ah?!"

Kyousuke didn't even notice the broadcast interruption. He had steeled himself for a painful battle and was pouring all of his strength into his legs, hoping to break through the encirclement and get some space.

"Get out of the waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyy!"

Shamaya, who had taken the baton from her team's third runner, assaulted a male student in a *happi* coat who was about to join the group beating. Crushing his head with her hatchet, she headed straight for Kyousuke and the others.

"I'll back you up, Kiriu!"

"Oh, Committee Chair! Thank yo—gugha?!"

Shamaya struck the back of Kiriu's head with the hatchet.

"Wha—?!"

Kyousuke and Takamoto turned to look.

Shamaya smiled sweetly as she kicked Kiriu's bloody body off to the side. "Well, I may not have been entirely honest…"

"Foul play!"

"Silence!" Shamaya shouted, swinging the hatchet. She launched her second attack, faster than the eye could see, at Takamoto.

"Guh?!"

The dark metal blade clashed with the baton.

"M-Miss Shamaya……"

"Kyousuke darling." Emerald-colored eyes turned toward Kyousuke, then fixed on the track ahead. *Go on.*

Her rose-colored lips mouthed silent words, out of sight of the others.

Takamoto, locked in battle with Shamaya, opened his eyes wide. "Public Morals Committee Chair, are you really…?!"

She was putting Kyousuke's life above her class's victory in the athletic festival. To see her act like this now…

"Thank you very much, Miss Shamaya," Kyousuke mumbled quietly.

"Aaalll riiight!! Third-year Class A's Saki Shamaya has just butchered third-year Class B's Takaya Kiriu and is attacking second-year Class A's Takamoto Yatsuzaki! Seizing the opportunity, first-year Class A's Kyousuke Kamiya is making his escape! He's started running with incredible vigoooooor!"

"Renko of first-year Class B is not in a position to waste her lead."

Waving at the MC booth, Renko looked flustered. "Uahh?!"

Pouring all of his remaining strength into his legs, Kyousuke ran as fast as he could. In his mind, he recalled the scoreboard—the difference between Kyousuke's class and Shamaya's third-year class was eleven points. Even if he reached the goal in second place, if Shamaya finished in third, his class would lose by one point.

Even Shamaya wouldn't openly throw the match for him. In that case, only one path to victory remained for Kyousuke and his class: overtake Renko and finish in first place.

"Big brotheeeeeer, come ooooooon!"

"Yaaay, Kyousukeeeeee! Get us into the Knock-Down Brawl!"

"I won't forgive you if you came this far just to lose, Kamiya! Show us you're a man!"

"Hyah-haaa! Victory is ours!"

""""Ka-mi-ya! Ka-mi-ya!""""

Kyousuke ran, cheered on by his classmates. With her limiter still in place, Renko was not that fast. The distance between them closed before everyone's eyes, but he had not reached her yet. Renko rounded the fourth turn. Kyousuke was at the third.

Maybe I can catch her—No, I've got to catch her, no matter what.

I don't want it to end like this.

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeyyy! Wait up, Renkoooooooooooo!"

"*Ksshh?!* Kyo-Kyousuke…"

Renko turned to look behind her. For just one second she hesitated but quickly shook her head and started sprinting with all her strength. The blue of Renko's jersey and the white tape of the goal line drew near.

—Bang!

A loud gunshot echoed through the cloudless azure sky.

Renko and Kyousuke. First-year Class B and first-year Class A. First across the finish was—

*"GOOOOOOOOOOOOAL! First-year Class B, Renko Hikawaaa…*at the very last second…was overtaken by Kamiyaaa! *The winner is first-year Class A! It's first-year Class A's Kyousuke Kamiyaaa! FUUUUUUCK, congratulations! That was an amazing turnaround, underclassman!"*

"Miss Hikawa also tried her best, didn't she? As expected, her huge breasts seem to have contributed to her defeat."

Kurisu praised Kyousuke, while Busujima thanked Renko for her efforts.

"…*Haah, haah…haah…*phew. Th-that was close."

"……Kksshh."

Beside Kyousuke, who was catching his breath with his hands on his knees, Renko lay sprawled on the ground, her abundant chest heaving up and down. Both were at their limit and had no strength left to exchange words.

While a storm of praise and abusive language swept over them, all the members of first-year Class A ran in.

"Yeah, that's our Kyousuke! That was a magnificent run, congratulations!"

"Ohhh gosh… Wh-what a relief… G-good job, Kyousuke!"

"…Hey, you guys…did well, too," Kyousuke replied. "I was…able to finish in first place because of you…thanks."

"Heh-heh. Of course! You know, when I give it a serious go, that's how it is. Eh-heh-heh—"

"Faaaaaaaaaaaace!"

"Gah?!"

Abashiri tried to rush on Shinji in a violent attack but was restrained by his classmates. Shinji, his face still bearing the marks left by Abashiri's fingers and teeth, cowered behind Maina.

"Ah-ha-ha…" Maina gave a strained laugh. "You had it tough, Shinji. But…you're amazing! You had a scary guy like that chasing after you, but you didn't get shaken and you finished running your lap. Kyousuke and Eiri and everyone was really amazing… I'm the only one who held us back, um…"

"That's not the case at all."

"…Eh?"

Surprisingly, it was neither Kyousuke nor Eiri who had refuted Maina's words. Sighing, Shinji turned to face her. "You were plenty amazing, too, Miss Maina. I thought you might hold us back, but you defied my every expectation. It seems you can do anything if you try."

"Sh-Shinji…" Maina's eyes grew wider at the unexpected compliment. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and she hung her head, mumbling, "…Th-thank you v-very much."

"Yeah," Kyousuke agreed, "Maina put in a really good effort for us. I mean, rather—"

"But the greatest threat wasn't Maina, it was Kyousuke, right?" Eiri said casually and poked Kyousuke in the side. "…For a second there I really did think we had lost. I thought we were done for…"

Holding his side, Kyousuke smiled bitterly. "…I know. It was bad. I couldn't believe it when those upperclassmen ganged up on me—"

"Not that." Eiri shrugged her shoulders and pointed to the baton in Kyousuke's hand. "When you picked up the baton. If the baton isn't passed directly to the next runner from hand to hand, the team *gets disqualified,* right?”

“Ah—”

When she said that, something dawned on Kyousuke. If it had been determined that they had “passed the baton by throwing,” they would have lost due to a rules violation. In other words, the reason Renko had kicked him back then was…

“Ohh, is there such a rule? I had no idea, I had no idea!” Renko, the subject of everyone’s gaze, played dumb.

“Renko, you—”

“D-don’t get me wrong here, okay?!” Renko became defiant and put some distance between herself and Kyousuke and the others. “I showed you mercy because she was going to completely crush you guys by beating you to death with that pipe! I wasn’t intending to save you, and I wasn’t intending to go easy on you, either! I really wasn’t!”

“……O-oh.”

Eiri was shocked at Renko, who was shouting and thrusting her index finger at them. “What’s with that *tsundere* act…?”

“You’d better prepare yourselves!” Spitting out that sharp parting remark, Renko ran over to her own classmates.

Kyousuke moved to follow her, and—

“…………”

—was halted by Renji’s gaze. He could feel strong eyes boring into him through the ivory-white gas mask.

The final event of the athletic festival still lay before them.

“Aah, what a pity! We were defeated… Such a shame! What a pity that *we won’t face Miss Hikawa and the others in the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl*! Too bad, oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

As Kyousuke and the rest of first-year Class A stood exchanging glares with Renko and the rest of first-year Class B, Shamaya, covered in blood spatter, threw her arms up in celebration as she crossed the finish line with a smile.

Behemoth Feat. Leviathan

CRYBABY OF PURGATORY AND FRENZIED GRUNT

FIFTH EVENT

Rank A+

SURVEILLANCE TARGET 9

TAKAYA KIRIU

HONORABLE ENFORCER

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS B | **Nickname :** UNDER OATH

A serial killer motivated to take the lives of the "wicked" by his belief in a particular version of "justice." Shows no mercy to those he deems to be said "wicked." Mutilated six men and women until their features were unrecognizable, and then threw them into a bath of sulfuric acid. Currently serving as the vice-chair of the Public Morals Committee, he is considered to be the second most influential student in the academy, next to Saki Shamaya.

Rank A+

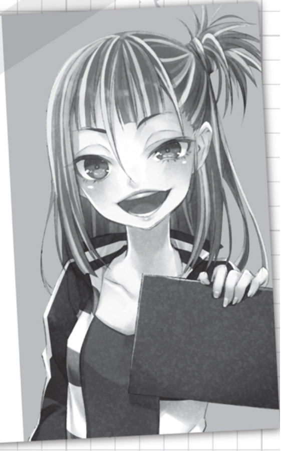
SURVEILLANCE TARGET 10

KURISU ARISUGAWA

INFAMOUS IDOL

Class : THIRD-YEAR CLASS B | **Nickname :** PRETTY FUCKING SICK

A theatrical serial killer responsible for five murders, giving the police, the media, and the ordinary people of Japan roles in her so-called Nightmare Theater. Favors shocking and sensational methods of murder, creating works of "art" such as "Main Street Adorned with Corpses." The academy's foremost problem student, under constant observation by both the teachers and the Public Morals Committee.



Behemoth Feat. Leviathan

CRYBABY OF PURGATORY AND FRENZIED GRUNT

FIFTH EVENT

Under a darkening sky, dust clouds danced across the battle-scarred athletic field. In the center of the battleground, marked off with a white line, young men and women stood facing one another, veterans of many life-or-death struggles.

Red and blue—to the east and west, their leaders carried class flags that fluttered in the wind. The heads of each army were clad in different colored outfits, glaring one another down.

On one side was a boy without much personality, and with nothing much to set him apart, while on the other side was a girl with plenty of personality, her face hidden by a jet-black gas mask. Including the students lined up in rows behind the two, there were seventeen people—some completely wrapped in bandages or leaning on crutches. However, their eyes all contained ferocity.

The broadcast rumbled like thunder across the competition grounds turned battlefield.

"Crazy guuuuuuys aaaaaand bitcheeeeees! This is a finaaaaaaaaal showdown! At last, the final decisive battle of the long-standing trial, the Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival! These warriors, who have already overcome fifteen levels of hell, will now do everything they can to completely crush one another in this battle of murderers, the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl! It's almost time to rummmmmmble! Now, everybody give me a FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!"

""""FUUUUUUUUUUCK!""""

The spectators shouted like an earthquake and thrust their middle fingers toward the MC booth. The background music, which roared like a constant explosion, added fuel to the fire of their frenzy.

Undaunted, Kurisu raised her voice over the noise. *"Oh yeah, I understand how you feel! Fuck and shit and oh my god… Who on earth could have predicted this? Pushing past the ranks of the upperclassmen, sidestepping their strongest opponents, clawing their way up onto the final* *stage, it's those rubbishy rascals…the first-years! It's a preposterous, unprecedented first-year showdoooooown! The second-years and third-years are all gonna hang themselves, those disgraceful bastards!"* She stuck out her tongue at them.

"…You can say what you like, since you didn't participate in the matches yourself, hmm?" Busujima took a jab at Kurisu, picking up the broadcast as she was showered in booing from the spectators. *"The rules of the match are simple and clear.* The players will try their hardest to beat the other team down, *and the class with the largest number of people still standing after twenty minutes wins overall victory regardless of their final score."*

The All-Out Knock-Down Brawl didn't have the slightest veneer of a proper athletic event. It was a straight-up battle, nothing more, nothing less.

"All right, now let's have a brief comment from the representative combatant for each class. First up, from the second-place first-year Class A, it's Kyousuke Kamiya. Tell us how you're feeling before the start of the battle."

"…………"

Kyousuke handed his flag to a classmate, took the microphone from the mouth of a certain poisonous purple snake that had wound its way underfoot, and inhaled deeply.

"—*We'll take 'em down,*" he spat, pumping his clenched fist. *"That is all."*

His words had been brief but full of feeling, carrying the bloodlust of the opposing class, his own classmates' excitement, and the jeering mixed with cheering from the spectators' seats. He felt as if Renko was laughing, "*Kksshh…*"

"…All right, thank you. Moving on to first-place first-year Class B. Their representative is Miss Renko Hikawa. Tell us how you're feeling before the start of the battle." The poisonous purple snake slithered over to Renko and presented the microphone in its mouth.

Renko, however, ignored it. Handing her flag to Renji, she moved both hands to the back of her head…

—*Click.* The sound of a fastener being undone.

She tossed aside the black gas mask, revealing her bare face.

""""

mimicking Kyousuke exactly. Even without the microphone, her unamplified voice resonated at an impressive volume. "……Well, that's what you said. But is that really how you feel, Kyousukeee?"

Renko's voice filled the silent grounds. Kyousuke remained quiet. He honestly could not answer her question.

"Heh-heh." Renko smiled and opened her raised fist and pressed it to her breast. Her stark eyes pierced Kyousuke—Kyousuke alone. "Because I do."

Renko's voice was bold. It was clear she was not speaking for her class but only for her own sake, and for the sake of Kyousuke, whom she was thinking about. It was as if the athletic festival—and anything else except for Renko and Kyousuke—was of no concern to her.

"I love you, so I want to defeat you. I love you, so I want to destroy you. I love you, so I want to kill you… I love everything about you, so I want to possess everything about you. Isn't wanting to do that a very natural feeling? Your heart and your body and your blood and your organs, your smiling face and your angry face and your crying face and your dying face. I want to make them all mine.—How about you? Do you feel like you want all of me? Or do you feel like you want to offer up everything to me? Or do you feel like you want my heart and body, but taking my blood and organs and life would be going too far? Heh-heh… Come on, Kyousuke, I want to know… What do you think about me, how do you feel about me? That's why I'm going to make you go all out. I want to really fight you, to break open the shell that surrounds your heart and drag your real feelings out into the light. Just like the day when I first told you how I felt, yeah?"

Most of the audience was bewildered. They had no idea what Renko was talking about. However, her words had a mysterious yet undeniable magnetic force. Even though they didn't understand, they were drawn in. Her rhapsodizing, her passion—it held their minds in a tight grip, and they were fascinated, whether they wanted to be or not.

"Renko……"

"…By the way." Renko's smile abruptly disappeared. She raised her beautiful silver-white eyebrows. "…Could you stop this music? The *gacha-gacha-gacha-gacha* is annoying. I finally have a good melody playing, but it's getting all messed up! Something so dissonant cannot possibly compare with the elaborate, elegant tune resounding inside me. So you, over there, turn it off."

"Eh? Ah, umm…m-me? Little Miss Kurisu Arisugawa?" Kurisu's eyes darted about in confusion.

"Yep, you with the gaudy highlights." Renko pointed. "I don't really care what your name is, though."

"O-oh…it's just, that kinda thing is a little troubling to hear. I mean, you're an underclassman, right? You can't just order an upperclassman around—"

"—Shut the hell up. Hurry up and turn it off without complaining, or I'll choke the life outta you!"

"Ooooookay, stop the music, please." Kurisu quickly fired off instructions to the staff. The loud grindcore music stopped, and silence fell over the grounds.

Renko nodded in apparent satisfaction and smiled. "Well done, upperclassman." She interlaced her fingers over her head and stretched.

"…Well then, I guess I can MC like this? We're all set up, so why don't we get the live show started, everyooone?!"

Renko's classmates, lined up behind her, promptly answered, """"Yeaaaaaaahhhhhh!!"""" and raised their fists in the air. Enthralled by Renko's charisma, first-year Class B seemed to completely adore her. Their energy approached a climax.

The members of first-year Class A flinched at their opponents' solidarity.

"What the heck is that, Kamiya… I-is it really Renko?"

"She's, like, super cool, and also crazy wicked scary, right?"

"…Maybe we should play dead or something as soon as it starts. I don't want to die just yet…"

"Before I die, I'd at least like to get one—no, two—rubs in though."

""""GMK! GMK!""""

"…Hey, GMK is our enemy, right? You and you and you and you are too fainthearted!"

Eiri struck her classmates' heads with the *harisen* war fan, one of the deadly "weapons" that Kyousuke and the others had acquired during the Calamity Arms Race that morning.

"Oh, dear me… It can't be, Renko has taken off her gas mask… Oh no."

"Hmm-hmm-hmm. That's just like Renko…but, we have my big brother! And we have Eiri and Crafty Cat. So we're gonna win—we're gonna be all right!"

"That's right, that's riiiiiight! You guys, whaddya worried about?! That big titty monster isn't worth worrying about! Little boobs reign supreme anyway, hyah-haaaaaa!”

“A-anyway, leaving boobs aside—if you give in to despair, you’ve already lost!! And I flat out will not surrender to that bitch Renko! Listen, you guys, let’s take her on with everything we’ve goooooot!”

““““Yeaaaaaaaahhhhhh!””””

Kyousuke, undaunted, glared at Renko as he also riled up his classmates. Renko smiled slightly as she met Kyousuke’s gaze.

“E-eeeeeek… Wh-wwwwh-what’s up with her? Gimme a break… You don’t have to stare at me with such scary eyes… Ohh. Shit…shit…” Kurisu crouched under her desk, trembling.

“*…Uh, okay. Thank you for your comment, Miss Renko Hikawa! Now, I’d like to move on to the match,*” Busujima announced, ignoring his terrified cohost. He checked the digital clock on the side of the scoreboard.

“Everyone, are you prepared? Well then, here we go… The final match of the Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival, first-year Class A versus first-year Class B in the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl—”

—As he gave the starting signal, a powerful growl shook the grounds.

× × ×

Kyousuke and her other opponents in Class A, and even her allies in Class B, were overwhelmed by Renko’s brutal roar. The ferocious noise didn’t sound as though it possibly could have come from a human throat, much less the throat of a young girl like Renko. The next moment—

“Well, shall we begin the song, Kyousukeeeeeeeee?!”

Renko rushed at him with a scream that was less the roar of a wild animal and more a violent death wail. Her approach was jagged, a meandering, undulating advance, and her hair spread out behind her as she swung her arms and swayed like a dancer, weaving to and fro as she attacked. Only Renko could hear the rhythm reverberating through the inside of her mind. To anyone else, her mad motion looked like little more than random flailing. Intense, deadly desire burned in her ice-blue eyes. The music spurring her on was—

“Tch… Well, you’re certainly full of bloodlust, aren’t you, Renko?!”

Kyousuke hadn’t felt the withering fixation of Renko’s murderous impulse in a long time, but he forced himself into action, moving to meet his enemy. Around them, the other students also joined the action, raising various battle cries as they rushed in.

“Hyah-haaaaaaaaa! What color is your blooooooooood?!”

“…Bring it on! And don’t expect me to go easy on you!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

“Die! Die-die-die-die—die, you garbaaaaaage!”

“I’ll keep my eye on the leftovers, I suppose? Heh-heh… If anyone gets killed, I’ll be sure to take excellent care of the corpse.”

Mohawk launched a suicide attack without a single thought toward the consequences, Eiri threw away her war fan and readied a small sword, Maina rushed onward in a daze, Ayaka shouted foul-mouthed abuse, Shinji picked up the fan and smiled brazenly…

Their opponents in first-year Class B were—

“Let us shatter the reality of these pathetic plebeians! Let us rend asunder their banal lives! Punishment-destruction-world! Let’s go, Azrael, the time is nigh for our ultimate secret weapon, Slow-Motion Apocalypse! …Indeed, indeed…”

“What are you doing, Michirou?! That will end the match, won’t it?!”

“A twenty-minute all-you-can-eat human-meat buffet…yum. Which one should I eat first?”

Michirou drew something that looked like a magic square on the ground and started reciting an incantation, Bob stopped to chide him, and Chihiro dashed forward, gripping a fork tightly, and—

“…………”

Not to be outdone, an ivory-white gas mask came charging up behind Renko. The person wearing it was silent but for the stamping of his feet over the ground as he followed at her heels.

The wind blew fiercely. The advance guard of each class collided in the swirling dust cloud.

Screaming with remarkable intensity, Renko leaped into the air.

“C’mon, accept my love, Kyousukeeeeeeeee!!”

—*Bwam!*

She swung her right arm with all her strength, targeting the back of Kyousuke’s neck. The blow could have cut through steel.

“Don’t mess around! Are ya trying to kill me or something?!” Kyousuke ducked, narrowly avoiding her attack. Their paths crossed, and Renko, carried by her momentum, sailed past him, tumbling to the ground.

Now covered in dust and dirt, Renko leaped at Kyousuke as he turned to look back. She bared her teeth like a wild animal, spreading her tattoo-covered arms playfully. “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, it’s obvious, isn’t it?! My feelings are deadly serious, after all! Wouldn’t it be best to accept them without shame and enjoy a quick death?!"

"Of course it wouldn't!"

As Renko, who was coming at him as though she was going to embrace him tightly, charged past again, Kyousuke broke into a cold sweat. Renko had completely mellowed out lately, so he had let his guard down, but this was her true nature. Brutal like a beast, merciless like a storm, innocent like a baby—the Murder Maid was created, raised, and now lived for the sole purpose of merciless slaughter. Killing was all she knew. It was all she knew how to do. And yet—

"Why?!" Kyousuke demanded, furiously evading Renko's relentless onslaught. "When you stopped Ayaka's rampage for us, you told us something, didn't you? You said that you didn't want me to be sad! You promised that you would fight even the strongest urge to kill! Were those words lies?!"

—*Bwam!*

"They weren't lies!" Renko roared, slicing through the air with her left arm. Her whole body spinning, she lashed out with one limb after another. "They weren't lies, but there's no avoiding it, is there?! The more time I spend with you, the stronger my feelings become, and the stronger my feelings become, the more intense my desire to kill you becomes!

"Whenever I take off my gas mask, every night, every night, every night, every night, I'm tormented by my desire to kill you and the fact that I can't do it! I'm in agony from wanting you to fall in love with me and not being able to get you to do it!

"I get so irritated thinking of you being close with Eiri and Maina and Shamaya, then I get more irritated with my own selfishness, but even so, in the end, I love you, so… Ohhh, come on! I'm not some well-behaved lady! For once, I want to act on my appetites and kill you and make you mine just as I please, Kyousukeeeeee!"

"—Guuh?!"

Unable to dodge her next attack, Kyousuke blocked Renko's right arm with his left. His bones groaned under the incredible force of the blow.

This sudden outpouring of frantic bloodlust was a sure sign that Renko was growing desperate, thinking, *I don't even care if it's unrequited love*, and *I don't care anything at all about how he feels*, and so on. The maddening, irresistible love melody was making Renko reckless.

"I'm writing a song for that tune: 'Kill him, kill him, if you kill him, everything will be great!' Whether it's one-sided or mutual love, if he dies, that's that, so hurry up and kill him! Beat him to death without grumbling about trivial things, strangle him to death without allowing him a moment to protest, flay him until no untorn skin remains, destroy his blood and flesh and organs, ransack and rape, tease and torment until satisfied! I don't have to kill myself—I think I'll kill-kill-kill-kill-kill-kill-kill-kill-kill you, my beloved, and find joooooooy!!"

"—Gaah?!"

Renko's right foot sank into Kyousuke's stomach. He was thrown off his feet, and he tumbled across the ground. Renko stomped her shoe down on the right side of his chest as he gasped for air—pressing down on his lungs.

Looking down at Kyousuke, Renko's beautiful pale face twisted up as if she was about to burst into tears. "……And you? I feel this strongly about you, but how do you feel about me, Kyousuke? I'm not saying I want you to tell me plainly. Just, if you should lose this battle, I would probably have to do as Mama said and give you up…"

Renko surveyed her surroundings.

The sports grounds were now entirely transformed into a battle ground. Angry roars and screams flew about in every direction as students from both classes collided with one another.

"Gyah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, yer too weak! Compared to Sweetiri, attacks from you small fries are nothin'! I'll knock ya down one after the other—uaagh?!"

"What was that? I couldn't hear you."

Interrupting his high-pitched cackling, Bob sent Mohawk flying with a mighty punch.

"Thank you—for the—meeeaaal!"

"Eat this!"

As Chihiro leaped at her with bloodshot eyes sparkling, Ayaka threw sand in her face.

"Guh?! O-of all the times… Calm down, Azrael! I know that your blood is seething from your return to the battlefield after such a long time! The surge of murderous impulse is—guh, gaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

"This is a battle, you idiot! What are you holding back for?!" Shinji thrust the war fan at Michirou, who was holding his left arm and ranting.

"How about you stop playing around and kill him for real, Shinji! He took out Arata and Kagerou, right?!" Tomomi snatched the fan from Shinji's hands and struck him over the head with it.

And Renji, who was shaking off attacks from—

"…………?!"

"Tch. Is this blade dull, or is this guy solid… The knife won't quite go through him, huh? In this case I should have prepared for foul play and readied my Suzaku blades."

"Oh dear, oh my, ee! Ee, ee, e—aiii?! Auau…aah, that was close—

whoooaaa?!”

It was a hard fight for Eiri, who deftly attacked with her shortsword while nimbly avoiding Renji’s fists, and Maina, who banged on Renji’s shins with an octagonal sledge hammer, then allowed her superhuman clumsiness to keep her out of danger even as she continued to attack.

Eiri’s skillful assault was not surprising, but Maina was putting forth an enormous effort. Perhaps she had gained confidence from her victory in the relay. Even as she looked as if she were about to blow a fuse, she challenged her opponent with dauntless courage.

Each and every person fought for victory, wearing desperate expressions.

Renko turned her gaze from the others back to Kyousuke. “…… Hey, Kyousuke. Do you wanna defeat me?” she asked. “Or do you want to lose? Answer me. Answer me, Kyousuke!!” Renko lifted her foot from Kyousuke’s chest and brought it back down with bone-crushing force.

Kyousuke quickly rolled across the ground, narrowly avoiding the attack. “I don’t know!” he shouted as he leaped to his feet and shoulder-tackled her.

Renko was taken by surprise. Kyousuke had attacked her for the first time. “Whuck?!”

Kyousuke pushed Renko down and straddled her, then struck back at what she had said. “Do I want to win or don’t I? Do I want to separate or do I want to stay together, do I want to like you or not—honestly, I don’t know! Only that—”

He raised his right fist overhead, staring directly at her bare, unmasked face. “I don’t want to lose! I don’t feel for certain that I definitely want to win, but…I don’t want to let it end like this, and I also don’t want to be separated! That’s how I feel, that you are important to me, Renkoooooo!”

He swung his fist as he yelled.

“……?!”

Renko’s eyes opened wide as Kyousuke’s fist smashed into the ground beside her head. “…Kyou…suke…?”

“You’re important, so—” Clenching his buried fist, Kyousuke continued, “I don’t want to hurt you. I say things like ‘I’ll knock you out’ and ‘I won’t lose,’ and then wonder why I said them. I don’t want to hit you… I can’t hit you.”

“

"Ah-ha-ha! Seriously, what the heck was that egocentric speech? You don't want to lose, but you don't want to knock me out…even selfishness has its limits, ha-ha…ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

—But Renko quickly stopped her raucous laughter and instead looked pleased, perhaps even a little tickled. "Don't be upset, okay? It's a really good melody. Despite that when I confessed my feelings, you struck me in the face… Hey, Kyousuke, could this be…what I think it is? Between then and now, can we say that your heart has changed a little bit?"

"…Ahh, I suppose it has."

"Can we say that you're beginning to fall in love with me?!"

"…A-ahh? Well, I don't know if that's the case, but—"

"Is that so? Well, in that case, *I can lose now…*"

"Wha—?"

Renko closed her eyes, and all the strength went out of her limp limbs. Her prior ferocity vanished, and she suddenly became docile, as though the tempo of her murderous melody had suddenly slowed. "It's what they call the weakness of lovestruck girls. When I heard about your feelings, my desire to kill you completely disappeared… If I killed you despite you finally starting to fall for me, that would be a waste. As I am now, I don't want to kill you… I can't kill you. And so I lose."

"Renko—"

"But the match isn't over yet." Still lying on the ground, Renko muttered as if she was talking in her sleep. "You have to win the brawl. Even if you can't hit me, the others will do the job, surely? In that case, there's no problem. Your words, 'I don't want to lose,' and… your feelings, 'I don't want to let it end like this, and I also don't want to be separated,' show me that they're not lies by winning the match."

Kyousuke shut his eyes tightly, though Renko impishly kept one eye open.

"—Okay, I'll leave it to them!" he answered forcefully.

"………Hmm? O-oooooohhh?! I couldn't see well, because others were in the way, but it looks like Class A's Kyousuke Kamiya has knocked down Class B's Renko Hikawa?! Seriously? That's amazing! That's our Warehouse Butcher! I mean, did he have a deceptive appearance or what? Leaving Renko Hikawa fallen on the ground, he's started getting violeeeeeennnnnnt!"

"And it looks like Miss Arisugawa has also seen her chance to get violent."

As soon as she knew that Renko had been done in, Kurisu's crazed energy returned. As her high-spirited broadcast continued, Kyousuke ran around the grounds and knocked down the students of the opposing class, one after another.

"Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So you've finally come, the worthy rival of my destiny! Azrael has also longed for your arrival!! Let us sate our lust for blood on this field of battle!…is what I should like to say, but it is still early to take you as our opponent. First is Renji Hikawa over there—guah?!"

Kyousuke sent Michirou flying with one punch, finally putting an end to his ranting.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, gotcha… What morsel should I start with first? Cheek? Arm? Shoulder? Chest? Leg? Butt? *Slurp, slurp*…all look so delicious—hyaan?!"

He tore away Chihiro, who had fallen upon Ayaka, and threw her aside.

"Ay, ay, ay! Seriously, geez, you're stubborn! How long is it going to take for you to fall? It would be better to pin you down and hold you—kyah?!"

He yanked the flour sack off Bob, who was holding Mohawk by the collar in her left hand and punching him in the face with her right. Bob covered her face with both hands and crouched down. "Nooo?!"

It had been about ten minutes since the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl had started. And so, after more or less crushing the enemy troops—Kyousuke finally challenged the greatest opponent, Renji Hikawa.

"Pull him doooooooooooown!"

Rushing over to Renji, who was still being harassed by Eiri and Maina, Kyousuke gathered all his strength and hit him in the stomach with a right-handed straight punch.

"………..?!"

Renji's large body swayed after taking the punch, which had had the full force of Kyousuke's sprint behind it.

Eiri, who had gone around to Renji's backside, and Maina, who had fallen down on the ground, opened their eyes wide. "Kyousuke?!" "Kyousukeee?!"

"Go down, go down, go down, go down, go doooooooooooown!"

Kyousuke frantically pursued the staggering Renji, punching again and again at his boulder-like torso. Once, twice, three times, four, five, six, seven…

"—Kksshh?!"

Finally, on the eighth punch, Renji went sprawling. The spectators got excited at the sight of him being overpowered, the monster who boasted strength that until now had been unequaled.

"Kyaaa—! Kyousuke is so coooooool!" "Wha…What kind of first-years are these—I can't believe it?!" "…Yeah, I know." "Ridiculous!

He’s beating down the same guy who destroyed me in a heartbeat?” “Ah…ah…!” “I give up. There’s no way just the three of us brothers could ever face him.” “He’s the real deal, huh?” “He’s gonna kill him.” “But justice will not yield!” “Good, Kamiya, push him down like that! If you knock him over, you’ve won!”

“Ooooooooooohhh!”

With the enthusiasm of the cheering section pressing down on his back, Kyousuke pushed after Renji. Straddling the fallen giant, he feverishly smashed at his face, alternating left and right punches, entirely ignoring the gas mask.

—And that wasn’t all.

“Hyah-haaa! Now, now, kill ’immm! Smash him to death!”

“Heh-heh-heh. With everyone beating on him, gas mask isn’t so scary! I’ll crush your balls, take that!”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha, Shinji, you’re totally savage! Beat the hell out of him!”

“Tee-hee. I stole a saw from the enemy! Use this—”

“Ay! Ay, ay, this is his weak point! Ay, aaay!”

“Oh gosh, oh dear! Forgive us, GMKaaaaaayyy!”

“…You’re better off dead!”

The students from Class A who were still alive swarmed around him and started to join in a group beating. Renji’s body was swallowed up in an instant as they sent up a raging dust cloud.

The students of Class B desperately tried to stop it, but they were unable to halt the momentum of Class A, who were riding on a wave of violence. On the contrary, they got caught up in the beating and were toppled one by one.

“.................”

Eventually, the cloud of dust cleared away, and what remained was the gas mask and a massive body covered in fresh wounds. Renji was stretched out on the ground, his limbs limp.

“*Haah*…ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha, *haah*… D-did we…do it?” Finally letting his fists come to a stop, Kyousuke stared down at the ivory gas mask.

There was—no response. Even when Kyousuke timidly got off of his body, Renji showed absolutely no sign of getting up.

“Ha…ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…” Welling up along with laughter came a sense of accomplishment and a sense of relief. Kyousuke raised a fist in the air, feeling the tingling pain left by his furious punches.

““““We…We did iiiiiiiiiiittt!””””

Kyousuke and the others shouted with joy, until—

“Renji—kill .*”*

The moment that cold voice rang out over the speakers, Renji sprang to his feet and growled. Behind the cheering Kyousuke, he drew back his tattoo-covered right arm.

“Kyousuke, watch ouuuuuut!”

“Eh?”

Kyousuke didn’t have time to respond, as Maina pushed him out of the way. There was a thunderous roar and—*BOOOM!*—a shock like an earthquake.

The nearby students screamed—“Aaaaaah?!”—and scrambled away in a panic.

Kyousuke toppled to the ground, with Maina on top of him, but his eyes were glued to the spot where he had been standing just a moment earlier.

“…………Huh?”

He could barely understand what had happened. Renji’s punch had blown away the ground like a shot from a cannonball, leaving an enormous crater. Whether enemy or ally, everyone stopped moving, staring at the unbelievable spectacle.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah, you’ve gone and done it, haven’t you?! Heh-heh-heh…” Reiko, who had grabbed hold of the mic at the broadcasting booth, cackled gleefully. *“Wake not a sleeping lion. And if you had just kept running away for twenty minutes, instead of messing around, you might have won, too. Going out of your way to trigger the unlimiter with your own two hands, how foolish…heh-heh! Truly foolish…”*

“…………Kkssshhh.”

In time with Reiko’s laugh, Renji let out a long breath through his exhaust port. Lifting his fist up from the crater, he moved both hands around to the back of his gas mask.

—*Click.* There was the sound of the lock breaking.

The limiter holding the monster back came undone.

Palpable bloodlust immediately washed over the crowd in a wave.

“All right, Renji, no need to hold back. Kill—”

“Mamaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

A high-pitched scream cut through the air.

× × ×

“……Renko.”

Swallowing her words, Reiko turned her gaze from Kyousuke to Renko, who had sprung to her feet, glaring menacingly at the broadcast booth, as if she was ready to leap at it.

Standing between her mother and Kyousuke, Renko’s voice trembled as she shouted wildly.

“Wh-what…what do you think you’re doing, Mamaaa?! This isn’t what you said before! You promised not to kill him, didn’t you?! So why are you—”

“I changed my mind.”

“—Huh?”

Reiko looked at her indifferently. “*After all…*,” she began, puffing out her cheeks, “*you aren’t really trying. I told you before the Knock-Down Brawl, right? I said, ‘Let’s go smash Kyousuke until there’s nothing left.’ And you nodded in agreement, Renko. So why aren’t you smashing him? Are you intentionally giving up? So you see, dear, the conversation has changed.*”

“Uhh……” Renko’s fury wilted, and in a panic she stammered for an excuse. “Th-that’s certainly true, b-but…what am I supposed to do, Mama? After hearing Kyousuke’s confession, my murderous melody subsided! I lost the desire to kill. In other words, um…if it gets to that point, I mean, it’s Kyousuke’s win…isn’t it?”

“

nothing to be done. My goodness…"

Putting a finger to her cheek, Renko lifted her smiling face. "Mama! That's wonderful, Mama, thank—"

"Then, I will kill Kyousuke."

Reiko's eyes were not smiling at all.

"…What?" her daughter froze.

Reiko shrugged and explained, *"If you won't kill him, I'll have Renji do it. If I don't, then sooner or later you'll probably wind up dead."*

"…I will?"

"Yes. I mean, are you surprised? If the Murder Maid, a custom-made killing machine, can't actually kill, then there's no reason for her to exist. Furthermore, this boy Kyousuke, to whom you are so attached, has no direct connection to the organization and seems to even hold some animosity toward it. It would be strange if we didn't regard him as a threat. There are many reasons he's a problem for Murderers' Murderers… Now, of course I don't think of you like some common tool. I treasure you as my own daughter, do you understand? And that's why I want to protect you, no matter the cost. Even if it means I must completely disregard your feelings."

"M-Mama…" Renko winced at the blunt statement.

"Hey, you bitch, Reikooooooooo!"

Kurumiya shouted from the bleachers. "What the hell do you think you're doing?! Kamiya is the favorite of the board chairman!! Do you have any idea what would happen to you if you just up and killed —"

"Whatever."

"……What the hell did you say?"

"Whatever, I don't care about that. My standing is above his anyway… You say Kyousuke is the chairman's favorite, but Renko is my favorite. I'm not going to toss her aside, even if she has been spoiled or broken. It's fine, so why don't you just try shutting up, Hijiri!"

"Reiko—"

Kurumiya gritted her teeth and glared at Reiko, fuming. She didn't have the power to oppose the woman, who, though she was her friend, seemed to hold authority over the board of directors—and even though a student was about to be murdered in broad daylight, not a single one of the teachers of Purgatorium Remedial Academy moved to intervene.

The first-year students who had not yet been told about the true nature of the academy, and even the upperclassmen, who had not known about Renko's true nature, were bewildered, unable to fully understand the current situation.

Ignoring the noisy students, Reiko cleared her throat. *"Ahem. Sorry, the conversation got a little sidetracked. As I was saying, I have many concerns. If Renko continues to care for young Kyousuke, I worry that it will invite certain inconvenient misgivings."*

"…Mis…givings?"

"Yes. Renko, I've been told you disobeyed Hijiri's orders in order to protect Kyousuke, isn't that right? And on top of that, now you're defying me… If I tell this story to the higher-ups, it will end very badly, do you understand that? You do understand, and yet you still bare your fangs at me? If that's the case, then this is indisputable mutiny. At least it will be perceived that way by the organization. Then even I won't be able to fully protect you… This time, at least, I'll see to it that you follow my orders properly, *okay?"*

Reiko lowered her voice. She faced her daughter, who was hanging her head. *"Renko. Kill Kyousu—"*

"Nowaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyy!" Renko shouted.

"……?!"

Reiko shook, startled by the surprisingly forceful defiance. Her eyes opened so wide they looked as if they were about to roll out of her head, and she stared in blank amazement, mouth hanging half open.

"I—" Renko's voice wavered, and she clenched her tattoo-covered hands. "I still don't want to kill Kyousuke. Especially now that my murderous impulse has gone away. I want to touch him, and I want him to touch me. I want to know him, and I want him to know me. I want to spend a lot more time together, and I want to laugh a lot more! And, should our feelings ever align, I want to give myself over to the melody of love that's in my heart, until no part remains untouched, thoroughly, tenderly, and I violently, madly kill him! That's why it's no good. You can't do it like this. No matter what you say, it's still absolutely no good! And if you're still going to try to kill Kyousuke now, despite all that—"

Renko pressed her lips together and stared at her mother, who supposedly outranked everyone else.

"*I won't let you.* I will protect Kyousuke. I won't let anyone kill him except me!"

She spit the words out coldly.

"…………"

Reiko stared at her silently. Expressionless. Unresponsive. A long moment passed. *"…Is that so? I understand. Yes, I understand perfectly well…"*

Reiko set the microphone down and, removing her glasses, wearily massaged the inner corners of her eyes. The muscles around her mouth and eyes twitched in half-hearted convulsions, as though she was trying—and failing—to smile. "I see now. You're far more seriously ill than I first thought… Love is blind, a sickness of the mind, is it? That must be it. Heh-heh—you've got to be kidding me!"

Reiko furiously threw her glasses to the ground. Stamping her feet in frustration, she crushed them underfoot. "What do you mean it's no good, what do you mean you won't kill, what do you mean you don't want to kill, what do you mean you won't let me kill?! You've gone crazy… Love has made you crazy, Renko! Love has broken you, Murder Maid. You're not sane, you see? I'm not joking! Renko, you're my precious daughter, and my valuable creation… As your mother, I have an obligation to correct my daughter's problems. As your creator, I have a responsibility to fix the failings of my creation!"

Gritting her molars hard, Reiko hung her head deeply. "So I'll correct you. I'll fix you. I'll save you! I'll cut out the cancer that is driving you crazy and breaking your mind, and I'll help you! If I don't protect you, no one else will. So it's okay if you hate me. It's okay if you detest me. It's okay if you resent me. Because I'm telling you, I……"

—*I love you, Renko*, she almost said.

Muttering, Reiko gripped the microphone tightly. "Renji. It seems like your older sister is getting a little carried away, so…don't pay her any mind if she gets in your way. Give her a slap and wake her up. Renji—"

Reiko shifted her gaze. She glared at Kyousuke with an absolutely arctic look.

"Kill!"

"

X X X

A thunderous roar. A tumultuous earthquake. A resounding explosion.

A cloud of dust obscured the area, and fragments of pulverized earth rained down from the sky. Kyousuke had managed to leap out of the path of Renji's attack and now lay on his backside, recoiling in alarm.

In the ground before him were two overlapping craters, proof of the destructive power of Renji's fists. If Kyousuke had been just a split second slower to react, the battlefield would have been showered in chunks of gore rather than clods of earth—

"Oh gosh…oh no…oh dear, oh my…"

On the other side of the enormous craters, Maina stood trembling in abject terror. She had narrowly avoided the destruction. Her eyes didn't even seem to see Kyousuke, fixed as they were on the enormous monster standing with his fists still pressed into the ground.

"……"

She stared up at the towering, terrible man, his big frame over six feet tall, his muscles like steel, completely covered in jet-black tribal tattoos, at the part of him that had been exposed for the first time, at his—*handsome, masculine face.*

"…………"

He had refined, delicate features, ill-suited for such a grotesquely muscled body. Light and shadow played over his chiseled countenance as though he were a sculpture cut from marble.

Not wearing anything that could be considered an expression, it seemed less and less likely that he had any human weakness. Losing the gas mask had, in fact, only made him even more impossible to read—

"…………Kyousuke…Kamiya."

Renji was utterly focused on Kyousuke. His voice, which they were hearing for the first time, was also inhuman and dispassionate. However, in his eyes, which were the same ivory white as his gas mask, murderous instincts swirled like eddies in a muddy stream.

"Uh—"

The instant his eyes met Renji's, Kyousuke found himself locked in place. His whole body was sweating, and he couldn't move a single finger. Even his breathing had stopped. He trembled with fear as he never had before—it was as if an immense pressure were bearing down on him, crushing his will and stealing the freedom from his body.

Renji raised an arm at Kyousuke, who could not even retreat…

“Wait a minuuuuuuteee!”

A moment before Renji’s fist came crashing down on him, Kyousuke’s body was snatched away by a figure rushing in from the edges of his vision.

“Wah?!”

Carrying the surprised Kyousuke out of Renji’s reach, the mysterious figure was—

“Heh-heh. Geez, Kyousuke, that was close, huh?”

“R-Renko……”

Narrowing her ice-blue eyes affectionately, Renko Hikawa smiled, flashing her sharp canines. With one arm wrapped around his neck and the other holding his knees, Renko carefully set Kyousuke down.

“It’s all right. I won’t let him kill you. Your life belongs to me.”

“…A-ahhh.”

Renko’s adamant declaration left Kyousuke bewildered. Not by her behavior or her words, nor by her earnestness or her naïveté—those were all qualities with which he was very familiar. This time, Kyousuke was baffled by *his own emotions*.

“Honestly, Renji is really strong, but my feelings for you are a hundred times stronger, you know. You can relax, Kyousuke—”

“You’ll protect me…you mean?”

“Yep. And if possible, I want you to escape together with Eiri and Maina and Ayaka… I don’t think this is much of a brawl anymore. Get as far away as you possibly can, so you don’t get wrapped up in the fight—”

“No way.”

“Why not?!” Renko opened her eyes wide.

“You told me something earlier, didn’t you?” Kyousuke replied. “I said ‘I don’t want to let it end like this,’ and ‘I don’t want us to be separated.’ And in response you told me to show you that my words aren’t a lie.”

That’s why—

“Let me fight along with you, Renko! Let’s combine our power, both of us together, and slaughter that monstrous oaf!”

“Kyousuke…”

Her clear eyes wavering, Renko blinked repeatedly. And then she laughed, baring her canines in apparent glee.

"Ah-ha-ha! You're right, for sure, you're right…heh-heh. Sorry, Kyousuke, it seems I underestimated you. You're right—we can do it. Let's perform together! We can definitely put on an amazing show! Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hey, it's started playing again…the awesome, climactic music started playing again, from the beginning! How great, with this melody playing, I really feel like killing. This music makes me want to rage with all my strength. Come on, try to keep up with me, Kyousukeee!!"

"Same to you!" he replied and followed after Renko, who had already started moving.

With a thunderous growl, Renko sprang at Renji, rapidly closing the twenty-yard distance between them. Leaping forward, she twisted in the air like an action-movie star and swung her right arm downward.

"Heeeeeeyyy, Renjiiiiiiiii!"

"…………?!"

Renko's punch, which had been aimed for her brother's neck, was turned aside by one of his brawny arms. But Renko continued spinning. Grabbing hold of Renji's arm, she flipped up and over his body, using him as a fulcrum to nimbly control her trajectory.

"Don't get in the way of your big sister's romaaaaaaaaance!" Renko roared. She smashed her right fist into the top of his head.

Renji, unable to follow Renko's tricky movements, took the blow full-on. His bare face, which until now had been completely expressionless, twisted slightly.

"…………!"

However, that was all. Even one of Renko's attacks, which could crush a human head like a ripe piece of fruit, could not destroy Renji's skull. With a simple sweep of his arm, as if he were brushing away a mosquito, Renji sent Renko flying.

"Uyaa?!" Renko rolled across the ground and puckered up her face. "Owww… You're such a jerk, geez!"

Renji reached toward Renko—

"Wait right there! Aren't you supposed to be killing me?!"

Kyousuke's straight punch struck Renji's side. It was as if he had punched solid steel—but he did not feel the pain. The passion roiling inside his body had burned every trace of weakness down to ash.

Anxiety, terror, resignation, despair…the wracking dread and awful pressure that had been holding Kyousuke in place—the moment that Renko had joined him, those feelings had cleanly, completely disappeared. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Renko and facing the enemy together, Kyousuke was certain he had nothing to fear.

"*I don't feel like losing.*"

“…………?!”

Kyousuke avoided Renji’s fist, which was too fast to follow with the naked eye. As bits of earth scattered against his back, he followed up his right-hand punch by throwing a left short hook.

Renji’s stomach, armored in thick abdominal muscles, was unyielding, but that was of no concern to Kyousuke. If two punches wouldn’t bring him down, then four punches; if four punches wouldn’t bring him down, then eight punches; and if eight punches wouldn’t bring him down, then sixteen punches—he just had to hit him until he fell.

“Oooooooooohhh!” Screaming like Renko, he fired off blows like a madman.

Renko launched another assault as Renji, who wore a gloomy grimace, tried to counter Kyousuke’s attack. “Hey, hey, Renji!! If you’re only looking at Kyousuke, you’re looking at hell!!” She smashed his defenseless head with her right fist.

From there, she struck again at Renji’s flank with her left arm and swept her right heel around in a roundhouse kick before retreating. She avoided Renji’s clumsy counter as he turned and stumbled.

“Hey, over here, Renko’s little brother! If you look away, you’ll get hurt!!”

Just as Renji had turned his attention to his sister, Kyousuke’s uppercut slammed into the underside of his chin.

“…………?!”

Renji’s huge body swayed. It was slow—but certain—proof of his exhaustion.

When Kyousuke entered his field of vision, Renko escaped into his blind spot. When Renko attacked, Kyousuke also launched a furious assault. Covering each other’s flanks while striking at any gap that opened up, Kyousuke and Renko, fighting together, were more than a match for Renji. Renji’s ground-smashing fists had yet to land a single direct hit.

Among the students watching breathlessly on the sidelines, out of reach of the melee, Ayaka shouted, “Big brotheeeeeeeeeeeer, Renkoooooooooooo! Take that pain in the ass down together! Beat him up, sister-in-laaaaaaw!”

Inspired by Ayaka’s shouts of encouragement, the other students raised their voices one after another. ““GMK! GMK!”” ““Ka-mi-ya! Ka-mi-ya!”” “Kyousuke darliiiiiing, please don’t die! …Renko, you can die, okay?!” “Eeek?! D-dangerous… Watching, it looks like our side is gonna die. Oh no.” “Tch… Ah, geez, they’re taking their time! If they had my blades in there, that guy would be cut down in a sec—” And so on.

When the crowd started up, Kurisu also resumed her temporarily suspended broadcast. *"Hwaaaaaahhh?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what a battle, folks! It's turned into monster versus monster, featuring monster-lite! I d-don't really understand the situation, but…anyway, it's fucking crazy! The grounds are getting all torn up!! Just one of those punches would mean instant death…but he can't touch theeemmm! Sticking with their 'hit and run' strategy, the monster pair of Kyousuke Kamiya and Renko Hikawa are driving Renji Hikawa into a corner!"*

"…………"

As Kurisu squawked away, Reiko, standing beside her, furrowed her brow. Before her very eyes, her daughter was laughing loudly in apparent glee, reinvigorated with newfound fury.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is the best, the very best! Slow and quick, light and heavy, stillness and motion, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, all are mixed in complicated and mysterious ways—it's like an amazingly cool mathcore track, isn't it! It's great, it's great, it's super great! I want to let everyone else hear it, too! Hey, can't you hear it? Hey-hey-heeey?!"

Renko's movements, driven by the strange music playing in her mind, were truly erratic. When she seemed like she was going to speed up she slowed down, when she seemed like she was going to dodge right she rolled left, when she seemed like she was going to leap into the fray she backed off, only to then jump in anyway.

And since only Renko could hear the music that was driving her, *her attacks were utterly impossible to predict*. When it came to raw physical power, Renko was no match for Renji, but her eccentric style and mercurial fury had him at a disadvantage.

"…………!"

Renji simply stood there, swinging his fists in straightforward blows. It probably would have been instant death if she had taken the full force of even a single punch, but as long as he didn't hit her, there was no problem.

We can do it! Kyousuke thought, but the next moment—

"

“Owaaah?!”

Renji spun and—still holding himself up on his hands—lashed out with both legs. Kyousuke was forced to retreat in the face of Renji’s fierce assault. Rotation after rotation, kick after kick, he leaped at him like a dancer. Going from a roundhouse kick to a dropkick, a dropkick to a cartwheel, a cartwheel to a flying backspin kick—

“Wha—?!”

—A feint. A somersault appeared instead. Renji twisted his body around nimbly in the air, and the tips of his toes struck down at Kyousuke, who had stooped low in order to avoid the roundhouse kick.

“Tch!”

Although he was able to narrowly avoid the attack by rolling away, cold sweat welled up on Kyousuke’s back.

He had thought that Renji was a brute who fought with simple strength, but apparently he was capable of much more. He had a lightness that one would not imagine from his slow-witted exterior—with movements that seemed to combine break dancing and capoeira martial arts, Renji was a literal *whirlwind of fury*.

His left foot cut through the air on a follow-through.

“Guh?!”

His right heel grazed Kyousuke’s cheek. But that was enough to tear away at Kyousuke’s flesh, sending up a spray of blood. The roundhouse kicks and dropkicks of Renji’s acrobatic assault were not as powerful as one of his titanic punches, but taking even one direct hit was still certain to lay Kyousuke out for good.

Kyousuke jumped back to evade the assault, and Renji pursued him with a flurry of consecutive tornado kicks.

“...........!”

Breaking from his boisterous dance, Renji struck out with a deadly right-hand blow. His spinning fist crashed into the ground under Kyousuke’s feet. A cloud of dirt and dust was thrown into the air, momentarily obscuring Kyousuke’s vision.

“

—He could not stand.

Kyousuke's vision swayed with the tempest of pain that now rushed over him, and he felt himself losing consciousness. Fresh blood oozed from his side, and his white tracksuit was dyed red. Nausea welled up inside him.

He might have been able to endure the shattered rib cage, but it seemed likely that Kyousuke's internal organs had been damaged as well. When he tried to put forth even the smallest effort, a strange agony shot through the left side of his body, and he nearly fainted.

Although he had survived the attack, the wound was more than enough to rob him of any power to resist. Given the circumstances, that still probably meant the end of him. Paralyzed and helpless, Kyousuke was sure that he would be quickly eliminated.

"…Really… Ha-ha-ha… This is…bad…" As he lay feebly on the ground, his laughter was born of deep despair.

Renji advanced on him slowly. In the corner of Kyousuke's vision, he could see Renko, similarly prostrate on the ground. Perhaps unconscious, she did not so much as twitch. It had taken only a single kick each to leave them in this condition.

Their hopes for victory had been demolished in a single assault, and they had been thrown into the depths of despair.

"*…Good grief,*" Reiko huffed. *"So you finally shut up, huh…? That's cooled you off a little, now hasn't it? But too bad, it's not going to be that easy! He may be a newborn baby, but Renji is the latest creation from Murderers' Murderers and my greatest masterpiece. To be honest, you never stood a chance against him, even combining Renko's power with your insignificant abilities. Heh-heh."*

"Big brother?! Big brotheeeeeeeeeeeer!" Ayaka's shrill cries cut through Reiko's laughter. "L-let go of me! Let me go, Crafty Cat! Let me goooooooooo!"

"I-I can't! If you go over there now, you'll also be… Oh no. Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what should I…what should I do, Eiri?! …Huh? Eiri—"

"Don't move."

No one was sure when exactly, but Eiri had snuck around behind Reiko and was pressing the shortsword against her carotid artery. "If you don't want to die, stop him right now," she ordered. "And same to you, Renko's little brother… If you value your mother's life, stop moving!"

"…………?"

Renji halted his advance and turned to look at the broadcasting booth.

Reiko stiffened and, with her eyes open wide, gave a strained laugh, “My, my,” and shrugged her shoulders. “You’re acting awfully violent, aren’t you, Eiri Akabane dear? But listen, I know. I know that Rusty Nail can’t kill. Even if you play at threatening me, you won’t—”

“Okay, want to try me?”

“……?!”

“Can I kill, or can’t I?” As she spoke, Eiri pressed down with the shortsword. Her tone was subdued and matter-of-fact. “I truly do not want to kill, and maybe I can’t…but if you were to kill Kyousuke, right before my eyes, I might just *impulsively* draw this blade back across your throat. Without even thinking about it, my body might just happen to move all on its own. Are you still laughing?”

“

Kyousuke gritted his teeth and, digging all ten fingers into the ground, slowly pushed himself back up.

“Eh?!” Reiko dropped the microphone. “He got uuuppp! That little brat got back up? I can’t believe it! What the hell…?! He took a beating from Renji with his limiter off, but he’s still standing! Is he really human? I don’t think there’s any way, but you weren’t going easy on him, were you, Renji?!”

“…………”

Renji did not answer. His ivory eyes were open slightly wider, in an expression of surprise.

Staring back at Renji with wavering vision, Kyousuke pushed himself back to his feet. Dripping with greasy sweat, his face warped into a twitching smile even as waves of pain washed over him—Kyousuke spat out words along with bubbles of blood. “…Not…yet… An injury like this…is…no big deal…so my bones are broken, smashed…at worst, you wrecked my insides, right…? I can still…do it…still……”

“...........?!”

As though rebuffed by Kyousuke’s unbreakable spirit, Renji took one step backward.

“Wh-why—?” Reiko muttered. “Why is he able to get up?! Even Renko hasn’t gotten up yet!”

“...Ha-ha... Why...indeed...?” Kyousuke laughed sarcastically. Shifting his focus to Renko, who was still lying where she had fallen, he turned Reiko’s question over in his mind.

—Honestly, he didn’t understand it himself.

He’d met Renko in a place full of strange and scary people, and they had formed a bond of friendship. He’d been perplexed by her ridiculous appearance, wearing a gas mask all day, and her odd speech and conduct... Even after she revealed her true nature and nearly killed him, they had hung out together as though nothing had changed, and she had always acted like a playful idiot. She may have been crazy, a psycho killer created to brutally murder people as surely as she breathed, but she was innocent and cheerful and pure and earnest, and as scary as she was, she was honest with her feelings.

Those qualities of Renko, Kyousuke—

“......I love...her.”

He confessed the feelings that until now he had been desperately holding back, desperately trying to stifle. In a voice that no one else could hear, he admitted it, just to himself.

And yet, he did not have the courage to say it plainly. He did not hold the resolve to face death. His feelings seemed trivial and weak compared to Renko’s passion.

Even so, Kyousuke loved her. She was more devoted and more dazzling than anyone he knew, and he felt more love for Renko than for anyone else.

“I won’t be killed...as if I would die like this! If you’re gonna do it, give the task to Renko. You two...as if I’d give you the satisfaction!”

““...........?!””

Reiko and Renji gawked at Kyousuke, who sprayed bloody phlegm as he shouted.

“Big brother...” “Kyo-Kyousuke...” “Kyousuke dear...” “

voice trembled. “Ahhh, is that so…? Is that so, Kyousuke…? Heh, heh-heh-heh-heh…hee-heh, heh-heh-heh—Renjiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii?!”

“…………?!”

The boy, who had been looking back and forth between his mistress and Kyousuke as if he was lost, immediately leaped to attention.

Reiko continued shouting, allowing her anger and hatred to show through. *“Don’t flinch! He’s just acting brave on the verge of death; there’s no way he can actually do anything… Kill him. Kill him, and shut him up! Going on about giving something to Renko and something being taken… We won’t fall for your tricks, Kyousuke Kamiya! How convenient that as soon as Renko’s out of the picture, you can babble on about nonsense like that. If you really feel that way about her, show us by surviving!! Kill him, Renjiii!”*

“……~~~~~~~?!”

Renji, his face locked in a dreadful grimace, stopped hesitating and launched into action with a terrible roar. He charged straight at Kyousuke, who was barely standing, and drew back his massive right fist to deliver a deadly finishing blow.

Kyousuke dropped into a guarded stance, protecting the right side of his body. Drawing back his own left fist, he grimly prepared to meet the attack.

“I said I won’t let you. I said I would protect you, right, Kyousuke?

“—*Even if it costs me my life!*”

The moment before the two crashed into each other, Renko, who was supposed to be unconscious, leaped between them.

“““…………?!”””

Kyousuke, the original target, was no longer in the line of fire, but Renji’s fist did not stop. His tremendous punch, as powerful as a howitzer cannon, tore through the air.

“Ren—”

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Renko wore a faint smile as she looked back over her shoulder at Kyousuke, showing her sparkling canines. Her long silver-white hair flowed like a river. Her ice-blue eyes were narrowed affectionately. In the depths of her wide eyes shone a dazzling blaze of emotion.

And then, in her last moment—

“I’m in love with you.”

—as her peach-colored lips parted…

Renji's fist barreled directly toward Renko's chest.

× × ×

"…………Ren…ko……?"

The sound of flesh and bone being pulverized. A breeze that smelled of rust. Reverberations left quivering through the air.

Kyousuke could not understand the spectacle that had just happened before his own eyes. He could not take it in. He could not believe it.

The pain that had filled him just moments before—the dizziness, the nausea, the fury—evaporated without a trace, and he simply stood stock-still.

Time was frozen.

"………Big…sis…………?"

Renji, who had delivered the blow, looked shocked. His ivory-white eyes were open as wide as possible. Fresh blood and bits of flesh painted his cheek.

The competition grounds were deathly silent. The only sound came from Reiko, who stumbled, staggered, and grabbed on to her chair with one hand to keep from falling. She was ghastly pale, and her voice trembled. "…Ren…ko……s-such a… No way…it can't…be true? H-how come… Why…why, it…why—"

Everyone's gaze was fixed on Renji, whose whole upper body was stained red. Blood dripped from his arm, along with small bits of gore.

* * *

Horribly mutilated, so badly that it was practically unrecognizable, completely and utterly destroyed—*was Renji's right arm.*

Deflecting his fist with her own right hand, Renko stood unmoving. Not a single wound marred her beauty, even though it looked as if some unknown force had devastated the area around her.

"……*Phewww,*" Renko exhaled. "Ah, thank goodness… This time, for sure, I really thought I was going to be outdone."

Renko, who had stopped Renji's punch with one hand and completely demolished his arm, was visibly relieved. It was an unbelievable scene. Just one of Renji's kicks had incapacitated Renko before, and yet she had parried his titanic punch without so much as flinching—

…………*What…happened?*

"Uh-oh, heh-heh-heh! I guess that's the power of love, huh, Kyousuke? My feelings for you can't be defeated by anyone!"

"Renko." A stern voice interrupted Renko's easygoing banter. Coming out of her daze, Reiko bit her lip and glared at her daughter. "Renko? I know I shouldn't have to ask this, but did you—"

"Yep. I used Over Drive, Mama."

Renko raised her hand to her neck and answered indifferently.

"What…did you…say?" Reiko was at a loss for words.

The leather choker at the base of Renko's neck—the *key accessory* that she wore even when she removed her limiter, that she didn't take off even in the bath, had come undone and was lying discarded on the ground where Renko had fallen a moment before.

Renko looked at Reiko and narrowed her clear eyes.

"…Sorry. No matter how much you oppose it, Mama, in the end I love Kyousuke. I love him so much that nothing else matters… I might be broken, or crazy, or wrong. The people at the *organization* might want to dispose of me now that I'm acting strangely, and I may not have much time left, and I may face a gruesome end. But, you know… *I don't give a damn about any of that*!! I'm going to stick to my feelings! Until the last of the last of my very last moments, I'm going to stick to them until I die! And so—"

Shouting, Renko drew back her left arm. She took aim at Renji's stomach, even as he still stood unmoving. "Don't you trample on my feelings anymoooooooooooooooooooooooooore!!"

She struck with the palm of her hand, with all her strength.

"…………?!"

Renji's huge body was sent soaring through the air and bounced and tumbled across the ground.

Just one blow. With just a single blow, the monstrous Slaughter Maid, who had not so much as twitched while taking dozens of attacks from Renko and Kyousuke combined, was defeated.

Renji, stretched out spread eagle, did not move. A river of fresh blood ran from his mouth. He was absolutely out.

""""……………………""""

Silence. And then—""""Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Cheering. Even though they didn't really understand the situation, the other students, who had been holding their breath in suspense as they watched the fight, stood up in unison, clapping and cheering.

The digital timer keeping track of the All-Out Knock-Down Brawl had stopped counting down long ago. Now a much-belated gunshot rang out over the field. At the broadcasting booth, Reiko sank down hard to the floor and hung her head.

Their respective classmates ran over to where Kyousuke and Renko were standing on the battlefield. Renko raised a blood-covered hand, her powerful voice resounding from the bottom of her lungs.

"Thank you, this was the best show ever! Thank you, everyone… Thank you, Kyousuke—"

Renko beamed with satisfaction and then immediately collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The chaos of the frenzied Final Showdown: All-Out Knock-Down Brawl was over. It was time for the closing ceremony.

Finally, after fierce fighting through all sixteen events, the class that occupied the top spot in the Nineteenth Purgatorium Remedial Academy Athletic Festival was Kyousuke's first-year Class A.

Due to his serious injuries, Kyousuke could not attend the closing ceremony, but apparently, during the proceedings, Mizuchi revealed the true nature of the academy to the first-year students—that this was not an institution dedicated to the rehabilitation of young murderers but rather a school for training those murderers to be professional killers. They were told that the true killer curriculum would commence at the start of their second year and that thanks to the turmoil caused by Reiko, it had been decided that there was no longer any reason to keep it a secret.

Furthermore, the academy offered a brief explanation of Renko's and Renji's conditions as "half-human creatures designed from the ground up to be killers" and of Reiko's status as their creator.

With those two serious announcements, the year's athletic festival came to a close. Afterward……

"Wowww, what a surprise! I thought there were a lot of strange things about her, but I never thought it could be something like that… heh-heh. Finally the mysteries have been solved."

"Yeah, I'm totally shocked! Becoming assassins, that's so cool! It's like a manga, right?! Kya-ha-ha! Oh-em-gee, I can't wait. Do you think we'll get to shoot guns and stuff?"

"I had my doubts about this academy, but it seems like Renko and her brother are the real problem. Being created just to kill people, isn't that too horrible? And Kamiya, who fought against them, is just as bad."

"Hee, hee-hee-hee… Welcome to the underground, knocking on heaven's door…"

""GMK! GMK! Mur-der-ers! Mur-der-ers!""

And so on, as first-year Class A raucously celebrated their remarkable victory. Their classroom was a cauldron of bubbling excitement.

In place of Kyousuke, their absent leader, the person who had accepted the championship pennant at the closing ceremony was—

"Oh no. L-let's calm down, everyone… Oh gosh."

—Maina Igarashi, now cowering in her seat.

In light of her tenacity in the Thousand-Meter Slaughter Footrace and the Eight-Hundred-Meter Pandemonium Relay, she had been chosen as their class's distinguished representative.

Coming over from her own seat, Tomomi said, "Clumsy giiirl!" and put her arms around Maina's neck. "Don't say things like 'Let's calm down'—you'll totally ruin the mood! We should be getting PSYCHED!" She grinned, showing off her white teeth.

"Ehh?!" Maina yelped in surprise.

Tomomi let go of her and continued, pressing a finger to her cheek. "Well, how should I say…um, sorry? Sorry I called you a bother and a burden and worthless and all. I mean, honestly, I'm the one who didn't make the cut, seriously!"

"Huh—"

Maina had certainly not expected to hear such words being spoken by someone who had only ever showered her with abuse.

"That's right!" Shinji chimed in, trailing after Tomomi. "…Uh, Tomomi was…there, I guess? What I mean to say is she didn't really do much. Considering how full of bloodlust she was, who would have thought she wouldn't kill even a single person! On the other hand, Maina, you—"

"Huhh?! Why are you dissing me, Shinji?! …Ahhh, you're low. Shinji, your rank's gone down again! It's seriously a major drop."

"No waaayyy?!"

Shinji looked shocked as Tomomi turned her back on him once again.

Oonogi and Usami guffawed at the pair's antics.

Maina also gave a strained laugh. "Ah-ha-ha… Shinji, you never learn, do you?"

It seemed that through her great efforts in the athletic festival, Maina had closed the gap separating her from her classmates.

If she gained even a little bit of self-confidence thanks to this victory, Maina would probably cause fewer and fewer *deaths* with her chaotic clumsiness in the coming days. That was probably a distant dream, but it was said that in the bottom of Pandora's box, which spread calamity and sorrow throughout all creation, hope remained last. One could not help but pray that that was the case for Maina—for Black Pandora—too.

Looking around the classroom as it bubbled with excitement over the surprise victory, Kurumiya gave a throaty chuckle. "Heh-heh-heh!"

On the blackboard, she wrote the schedule for the agenda from then on—including the after-party being held in the big auditorium in the new school building from late at night until nearly dawn.

“You really worked hard, you bastards! This time, and only this time, I’ll give you a little recognition. I can see that you’re not interested in listening to me talk, but I’ll overlook your rudeness! The iron pipe is out of action, at least until the after-party is over—”

“Hyah-haaaaaa! My sweet, beloved Kurumiiiyyyaaa! We won, right? I did my best, right? As you promised, my extraordinary reward…”

“…Hmm? Ah, right. Come and get it.”

“Gyah-haaaaaa!!”

Mohawk approached Kurumiya, who brandished her pipe and proceeded to shower him with blows. With the sound of the strikes—*wham! wham!*—sprays of blood spattered everywhere, and low, melodic screams filled the air.

Gazing absently at the situation from her seat, Eiri let out a yawn. *“…Fwah.”* It seemed the sleeping toxin administered to her by Busujima had not yet entirely worn off. “…So sleepy. Damn that old man—the next time I run into him I’m gonna kick him in the crotch.”

“Now, now, don’t get that upset. You’re not hurt, so everything turned out okay in the end, right?”

“It’s not okay at all!” Eiri glared at Kyousuke. Her rust-red eyes were blurry. “……I thought you were going to die. I said ‘I’ll protect you’ so passionately, but in the end Renko was the one who saved you. Nothing could be more shameful…” She spit out the words and bit her lip.

“Eiri—”

Kyousuke held complicated feelings for Eiri. Ever since visiting her family home, he vaguely understood that Eiri cared about him much more than she let on. He was grateful and happy for her feelings.

However, even so, Kyousuke was—

“Big brother, you’re really amazing, huh?! You really got the crap beat out of you, but you’re already good as new! You give Mohawk a run for his money!” Perhaps trying to dispel the dark atmosphere that hung over them, Ayaka spoke in an extremely cheerful voice.

“No, no…” Kyousuke frowned. “…Honestly, it was all fake courage, you know? And I’m far from good as new…”

In truth, even walking was still somewhat difficult. In addition to a number of broken ribs where Renji had kicked his right side, Kyousuke had suffered damage to his internal organs, and he would require considerable bed rest. It was probably the worst injury he had suffered since two years ago, when a biker gang ran him over more than thirty times and then spent almost an hour thrashing him with metal bats. Or maybe since that time when he had been severely beaten by his father…

“Even so, you’re plenty amazing! If you were a normal person, you probably would have died right then. Even Renko is still resting, you know,” Maina said.

“N—”

Kyousuke held his tongue.

Renko had collapsed after defeating Renji, as if she had used up every last ounce of her strength. She still had not regained consciousness and had been put to bed in the infirmary. It would have been one thing if her collapse had been caused by fatigue and injury sustained during the athletic festival and the battle with Renji. In time, she would have recovered from her injuries, and knowing Renko’s resilience, she probably would have been back on her feet pretty quickly.

But—

“……Um, Miss Kurumiya? Excuse me.”

“Hmm? What is it, Kamiya?”

Their teacher paused her beating and turned to face Kyousuke. She was spattered with her victim’s blood, and a sea of red pooled around her feet—and around Mohawk, who had been beaten until the iron pipe was bent out of shape…

“Well, uhh… Could I go to the infirmary for a little while? I’ll come back when the after-party starts.” Kyousuke scratched the back of his head and averted his eyes from the grisly scene, which demanded a mental mosaic.

Noticing his distress, Oonogi looked concerned and called out to him in a worried voice. “…Huh? Wha’ssat, Kamiya, does it hurt? You gonna be okay?”

“Whaaa—” Shinji pouted his lips and groaned in displeasure. “It won’t be very exciting if our leader is absent, will it…? Your health or our high spirits, which is more important?!”

“Huh? Of course it’s the former. Use your brain! You must be joking!” Tomomi pulled out the *harisen* fan and—*whack!*—beat Shinji over the head.

“Hee-hee-hee…” Usami gave a vulgar laugh. “He’s probably not going for his injuries but for boobies… He’s planning to sneak in and molest Renko while she sleeps in the infirmary, hee-hee… I might take advantage, too—gyuah?!” Before Usami could stand up, a pencil case, thrown by Ayaka, smashed his face in.

“Hmph.” Kurumiya snorted and turned back. “…Go on then. I’m guessing you want to be by your precious Renko’s side—*hya* !”

“Whoo-hyoooooo!”

“Th-thank you…”

Kyousuke left the classroom, putting the death agonies of

Mohawk, who was already consumed by masochistic pleasure, behind him.

He went down the hall and descended to the first floor, headed for the infirmary. As he passed by the room for first-year Class B, he could hear Busujima's voice through the walls of the classroom, praising them for their second-place finish.

"…………"

Eventually, and after some difficulty, Kyousuke placed his hand on the infirmary door and took a deep breath. Preparing himself mentally, Kyousuke slowly stepped into the infirmary.

Just as he expected—

"Heya."

A woman in a white lab coat, with silver hair and blue eyes, raised a hand in greeting. Reiko was seated next to her daughter, who was sleeping on the farthest right of four beds with her gas mask on. She smiled stiffly. "Welcome back."

"H-here I am…"

After this strange exchange, they fell into an awkward silence.

The only other person in the infirmary was Renji, who had been put in a bed next to Renko and was wearing his gas mask, too. The remaining beds were empty. The school nurse was also absent.

Due to the great number of casualties caused by the athletic festival, an entirely separate temporary infirmary had been opened in the spacious gymnasium. That was where most of the injured were being treated.

In the silence, Reiko mumbled in a vanishingly small voice.

"—I was jealous."

Stroking Renko's hair as she slept, Reiko narrowed her eyes. She had taken off her glasses. A faint smile passed over her lips as she gazed at her child, but her eyes were red from crying, and the obvious streaks left behind by tears told what was really in her heart.

"As you know, if my daughter does not have her limiter equipped, every single one of her emotions is tied to the act of killing… You can never see her with a serene expression. That's true even for me, Renko's mother, and it's something I have to keep in mind whenever I remove her limiter, especially because my feelings for her are so strong. Unlike Hijiri and the others, my body is very weak, so…unless we're separated by iron bars or a solid barrier, or she's immobilized, it is impossible for me to face Renko when she gets like that. To be honest, she's nearly killed me several times, you know."

Reiko smiled bitterly and took a flat silver flask out of the inside pocket of her white jacket. She opened the lid and swallowed greedily.

Wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her coat, she let out an alcohol-tinged sigh. "…You probably don't understand. You don't know my frustration, unable to embrace my darling daughter and rub our cheeks together, no matter how much I want to. But I get it… Even though you care for Renko, even though you love her…when this girl responded to your feelings and earnestly tried to kill you, you felt neither love nor joy…only fear and terror. I'm telling you, I get it. I really do understand how you feel, caring for Renko even as you tried to deceive her and hide your feelings. I understand…but… aaahhh…"

Tears poured from Reiko's eyes. Gritting her teeth, she tightened her grip on the flask. "Even so, it's so annoyiiinggg! In just one moment, the very thing that I've spent so long agonizing over…was accomplished by an outsider who's only been with Renko a short while! Isn't that too cruel…? Until now, Renko couldn't help but surrender herself to her murderous impulses, but after meeting you she learned to endure it, grew more and more rich with emotion, began to show feelings that until now we had never seen… I couldn't change Renko, but you did so easily…aaah… And she was such a good girl… She listened to everything I said, she always thought of me first, she loved me… In Renko's mind, I was number one…her number one favorite persoooooon! Aaah…waaaaaah!"

Reiko tossed the flask away and fell prostrate on the bed where her daughter was sleeping. Her muffled voice could still be heard leaking out from around the comforter. "I understand…and I understood it then, too—really, I did! This all goes back to my selfishness. Even though Renko was created as a tool, I wanted her to experience a little more human life…so I enrolled my daughter in this academy. As a result, Renko become more human-like, so I have to be happy…probably not a desirable quality in a killing machine, but it's the very change that I'd been hoping for. I have to support her the best I can. Despite that, I—"

Reiko's outstretched arms grew tense. Her shoulders trembled as she clung to Renko's sleeping form. "It—it's just that I'm frustrated… I'm envious and jealous of you, Kyousuke, so I tried to trample on Renko's feelings. I'm the worst… I really am just like a child. I'm the one who's been acting childish… If only I was more of an adult. If only I was kinder. If only I was more levelheaded…*something like this* would never have happened! I'm sorry, Renko… I'm sorryyyyyy…"

"U-um…Miss Reiko?" Kyousuke timidly interrupted Reiko, who continued apologizing in between sobs.

"Hmm—" Reiko stopped apologizing and sat up. Rubbing her puffy eyes with the sleeve of her white lab coat, she turned her gaze toward him. "…What?"

"Um, I've got something I want to ask you, but…"

Kyousuke shifted his gaze from Reiko's eyes to the bed—to the sleeping Renko—and spit out the question that had been bothering him the whole time since the athletic festival ended.

"Why doesn't Renko *wake up*?"

"

equipped, with extraordinary learning abilities, superhuman physical capabilities, outlandish fighting skills, aberrant resilience… These are the kinds of things I'm asking about. Aside from what I've said, do you know anything else about her?"

"…No. I think that's about all I know."

Since he did not want any firsthand experience with Renko's "killer" persona, Kyousuke had made a point not to talk about that side of her, and Renko herself had also not volunteered anything. Kyousuke felt that he knew at least something of Renko Hikawa but honestly knew almost nothing about Murder Maids.

"Is that so…?" Reiko nodded at Kyousuke's words and, for a short while, thought to herself in silence.

Finally—

"Say, Kyousuke. Why do you think that children like Renko and Renji were created?"

"Huh? That's, of course, to kill people…right?" Kyousuke answered quizzically.

"That's half-right."

"…Half?"

"Yep. Come on, think about it—killing one person isn't that hard, surely? If they have a special weapon or the right approach or even just the sheer resolve to make it happen, even a child can kill an adult. So despite that fact, why was it necessary for me to go out of my way to produce a custom-made Murder Maid?"

"Mm…to kill more reliably, or something?"

"That's also partially correct…for professional killers, fighting strength is of secondary importance, you know. The ability to hide one's special weapon and intent to kill as contact is made with the target, the skills to quickly and quietly finish the job unnoticed, the knowledge to complete the kill without leaving a trail… Those abilities are far more important. That's why even at this academy for raising professional killers, it's the serial killers who can kill many people without being caught who are especially prized."

Be that as it may—

"Strength is also important, however. Maybe not so much when it's one-on-one, but there are many instances when the target is accompanied by guards. Depending on the job, superhuman strength might sometimes be necessary. Actually, all the elite professional killers like Hijiri and Mr. Busujima have absolutely monstrous strength…and many other monsters like them exist outside of the killers employed by the organization."

For this very reason—

Reiko lowered her voice.

"When we want to control monsters in the making or eliminate monsters that are in our way, greater than monstrous strength is called for. And so they were born, the 'killers of killers'—taking on the job of murdering and assassinating their peers… They're *monsters who kill monsters*."

"Wha—?"

Stepping away from the iron railing, Reiko approached Kyousuke, leaning close to his astonished face. "…Among them were born Renko and her brother, the Murderers' Murderers, see? In search of ever greater power, the project to create killers from scratch got its start about six years ago. Renko was creation number seventeen, and Renji was number forty-eight. By the way, the name GMK48—"

"W-w-w-w-wait a minute!" Kyousuke suddenly interrupted Reiko's long speech. Something she had said demanded further explanation. "…Six years ago?! How does six years make any sense?! I mean, Renko is sixteen years—"

"She has the body of someone about that age, yes, but in actuality she's only *three years old*."

"—Huh?"

……*Did she say three years old?* Kyousuke was at a loss for words as Reiko dropped another bomb.

"And her youngest brother, Renji, is not even close to one year old yet."

"…………Seriously?"

"Yep. Well, they're different from you and your friends, in a number of ways. Like—" Reiko hesitated a moment. She turned to face away from Kyousuke.

"…Their lifespans."

"Eh—" Kyousuke did not know how to respond to Reiko's ominous words. He absolutely did not want to believe it—he could not believe it.

"…Think about it. If we could produce elite killers left and right, before long there would be no point to building academies like this one. There would be no need to go out of our way to get our hands on talented people like you…but the Murderers' Murderers aren't perfect yet. Oh, when it comes to their abilities, there's not much to complain about, but there are some problems with their longevity… Since they're artificially created beings, perhaps it's some form of compensation for their extreme capabilities. At the earliest, we've had children die without making it through a single year. Among the forty-eight that have been created so far, seventeen have reached the end of their lifespans, thirteen have lost their lives on the job, and three have died in other circumstances. The whole first generation, numbers one through eight, are completely gone. From the second generation, numbers nine through sixteen, just one remains, and from the third generation only Renko and one other are still alive."

"Th-that's…"

—That's less than a third, isn't it?

Reiko let out a sigh at the dumbfounded Kyousuke. She sounded completely exhausted. "Kyousuke. You asked me in the infirmary, right? 'Why doesn't Renko *wake up*?' It's probably because she used her Over Drive."

"…Over Drive?"

"Yes, Over Drive is a secret weapon, so to speak, that allows her physical abilities to vastly exceed their normal limits. The stress it places on her body is immense…but originally the Murderers' Murderers were treated almost like disposable goods. If one was lost, we could just make another, so it was all right if they went out in spectacular suicide attacks… The people who wanted to use Renko and her siblings as tools forced us to add that feature halfway through their creation. Even among the Murderers' Murderers, Renko was a well-made child, and if she had continued on as she had been, I think she should have been able to survive until graduation, but…that girl used her Over Drive… I forced her to use it."

That's why—

Reiko's voice trembled as she mustered up the courage to tell Kyousuke—who had just now begun to finally acknowledge his feelings toward Renko, feelings that he had been desperately holding back—the truth of the matter, a truth that even she did not want to acknowledge.

"Sometime in the near future, probably sometime very soon, *Renko is going to die*."

"Murderers' Murderers, huh…"

The day after the athletic festival ended—inside the bright red limousine she used for domestic travel within Japan, Fuyou Akabane muttered to no one in particular. As she viewed the playback from the video camera she had carried around, she thought about "them," the creatures she had observed during the final event, even as she watched her daughter's moment of triumph.

Their strength, endurance, speed, and ferocity truly set them apart from ordinary people. She wondered at the intelligence and technological power that could create such beings and couldn't help but admire it. Even the family members of the Akabane branch struggled to keep up with the expertise of Fuyou's house, but—

"In the end, they're nothing but inferior counterfeits and substandard creations. Heh-heh-heh… Even if we Akabane were to take the time necessary to refine their techniques, they would still not be without certain flaws and deficiencies. How presumptuous to produce children without troubling the womb. It leaves them without traditions or social standing—"

A simple electronic tone rang out. Fuyou took a similarly plain cell phone from the sleeve of her kimono and deliberately pressed the call button.

"Hello. It's me."

"Lady Fuyou."

"Oh, if it isn't Murasaki…"

Fuyou's eyes, the color of fresh blood, opened wide as she heard the young man's voice. The person on the other end was the second son of the main Akabane family, who was currently overseas on a job—Murasaki Akabane.

"*I have safely made contact with the target*," Murasaki said curtly, skipping right to the important matter at hand. *"What shall I do?"*

"…… Give him the phone."

"*Understood*," Murasaki replied quickly.

Fuyou paused the recording and took a deep breath—she pressed gently on her throbbing chest.

Before long, a rough male voice answered. *"Ah, hello? It's me, Kamiya—"*

"Naoki?! It's been so long! This is Fuyou!" Her deep, deliberate breathing had done nothing to calm her excitement. Fuyou's voice bounced cheerfully as she spoke. "So you're still alive. That's wonderful… I thought for certain you would have dropped dead by now. Just how many years has it been? I haven't seen you since

Masato's funeral, so…six years? It really has been a long time, Naoki! Are you still madly in love with Sanae? Ah, speaking of which, I'm sure you've heard from Murasaki, but the other day I met your children! Kyousuke looks just like you, Naoki, and Ayaka looks so much like Sanae, doesn't she? Both are extremely good children, particularly Kyousuke, whom we would very much like to adopt as a son-in-law into the main Akabane family—"

"Shut uuuuuuppp!" An angry roar exploded from the receiver, forcing Fuyou to pull her ear away from the phone. *"Don't just go squawking on and on like this is some kind of surprise attack. I'm seriously pissed off. You're as awful as always… I feel real bad for Masato. But I guess he's already dead."*

Muttering, the man on the other end of the phone—Naoki Kamiya—laughed bitterly. "*Okay, let's leave off the talk of Masato… Is it really true?"* he asked in a serious tone. *"Our kids are in the criminal underworld's—they've been tossed into some damn educational institution that gathers murderers and raises them into professional killers, did I get that right*?"

"……Yes." Fuyou nodded and shifted in her seat. "Yours is not a particularly uncommon surname, so I thought that surely it could not be true, but…the other day when I met them and saw their faces, I believed it. Kyousuke and Ayaka, even their names are the same, aren't they? Well then, there's no mistake. Your son is being held captive."

"Tch… You're not supposed to be contacting me at all. So what are you saying? That the group that's hunting us now is connected to that school, huh?"

"Yes. However, it appears that it is not the academy itself but rather the main body of the organization, though it is quite a large firm. It also has many roots in the criminal underworld, so the usual methods of recovery will probably not be possible. Even we Akabane do not particularly wish to confront them, so.

"But," Fuyou continued, "I love my husband. I love him more than anything in the world—no, in this world and the next. If it's for the sake of my beloved Masato or for the sake of our children, whom I created with my beloved Masato, and…if it's for the sake of *my beloved Masato's former colleague and dear friend Naoki*, then I am willing to lend my aid."

"—Are you serious?" On the other end of the line, Naoki's tone had changed.

Fuyou smiled and answered eloquently. "Of course I am. If you wish, we Akabane shall safely conceal the two of you and assist you in taking back your children from that organization."

"……………"

Naoki was silent as he scrutinized Fuyou's words.

"*—And the fee?*" he asked after a long pause. *"What do you want in return?"*

Fuyou's smile grew wide. "*Nothing.*"

"……What?"

"I told you, I want nothing in return. I won't accept a fee, so you needn't concern yourself with such matters."

"No, no, hold on, I am worried about it, actually… Something's not right. Like, you've got an ulterior motive… You're Fuyou Akabane, right? The evil, sadistic, insane Crimson Cradle who hounded down Masato and forced him into marriage—nearly killing him in the process? You can say there's no price attached, but I know you're definitely scheming something —"

"Naoki." Fuyou spoke quietly but assertively. "Love means you do things free of charge. Price? Payment? Please put a rest to such boorish suspicions. This is why, no matter how much time passes, you'll never live up to Sanae."

"

clean everything up so that there would be no future trouble, she concluded.

Fuyou smiled and pushed the restart button on the video player again.

Psycome 5: Murder Machine and the Catastrophic Athletic Festival / End

AFTERWORD Master of Ceremonies

Hello, or should I say, “How do you do?” I am Mizuki Mizushiro.

Did you enjoy Volume 5, which introduced quite a few new characters? If you include the ones who had so far been mentioned in name only, twenty-two new characters appeared. That’s a lot!

And the number of new characters isn’t the only thing that’s gone up this time around.

I have three pages for the afterword. Up until now I’ve kept it to exactly one page, but the book became somewhat bulkier, and something of its beautiful style was lost…

Anyway, it’s in my nature to want to start with form in whatever I do, and I have a bad habit of wanting to be particularly precise about certain odd things.

For example, sentences.—Yes, now! The periods affixed after “certain odd things” above and “sentences” in the previous line are sitting in exactly the same position. It all came together beautifully.

—Yes, and now! The positions of the periods affixed after “came together beautifully” one line ago and “new characters isn’t the only thing” six lines before that, plus “I am Mizuki Mizushiro” three lines before that also come together, situated in one neat horizontal line. If they didn’t come together like that, then when I turned the text into a manuscript, the characters would likely be slightly out of alignment due to the inclusion of the extra text for phonetic guidance.

…And, well, that’s how I am. Even petty things that would get a “whatever” from any other person—Okay, now! When the line changed, the word “petty” was cut off, but this is what I cannot stand the most. And now, the page changed in the middle of a sentence, but this I also absolutely cannot stand. On the other hand, take the section from “but” to “cannot stand.” It’s beautiful the way it perfectly matched up.

And now, the period affixed after “beautiful” has formed one neat horizontal line with the periods nine lines, fifteen lines, and eighteen lines before. Whooooooah, I can’t stand it!

The “I can’t stand it!” just now was in the same position as “a lot!” from nineteen lines ago… Okay, let’s leave it at that. In other news, when I stack up lots of vowels like in “whooooooah,” I always put the vowels in multiples of three + a small character, but since the aforementioned issues of matching up the ends of sentences and cutting off words are a higher priority, depending on the situation I may make adjustments and break the "multiples of three" rule. Case by case.

Of course, there's the idea that "Rather than carry on about things like that, how about worrying about the quality of the sentences themselves?" but it's in my nature to want to start from form in whatever I do. No matter how beautiful the writing, I can't be satisfied until not only the content but the format of the sentence is beautiful as well. It's fine to polish the substance after polishing the appearance.

To me, beautiful writing is not something to be read but something to *look at.* Neatly matching up the ends of sentences is connected to the beauty of the white space around the text, and the beauty of the white space is connected to the picture-like beauty of the text when looked at on a larger scale, and that beauty is connected to readability, I think.

I have some other fixations besides these, but I probably started to notice things like this around Volume 3. If you feel like it, I bet it would be interesting to try to read the book while focusing on those issues. But matching up the ends of sentences is really difficult, so there are also plenty of places where the white spaces don't form perfect concave and convex lines. Therefore, my best advice is to briefly look over the very last line of characters on a page, and where the page changes! Furthermore, there are also cutoffs that are beautiful and cutoffs that aren't, and there is also a method around them…and so on. If I tell you all about it, there will be no end to it.

The space reserved for this afterword has already been filled, so how about I move on to expressions of gratitude?

To the person in charge, Ms. Gibu; the illustrator, Namanie; the designers at musicago graphics; the proofreaders (it bothers me that they've been left out until now, so extend this to the previous volume and the ones before that); the PR team; my friends; my family; all of my relatives; everybody who participated in the publication of this book; and more than anything, the readers who have supported and cheered for the PSYCOME series:

Truly, thank you very much!

Expect Volume 6 around summer. As planned, it will be the final volume.

I'm glad that I read all the way to the end—I will write on with the aim that you say that to yourself when you finish the series, so thanks in advance.

Mizuki Mizushiro
~Written while listening to DEP~

In this story, Miss Shamaya was definitely doing XX with everybody, I think.

NAMANIE